

**Imperfectly happy**

**Onvolmaakt geluk**

**Ad Bergsma**

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# Imperfectly happy

## Onvolmaakt geluk

### Proefschrift

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*'A later realization has been the beauty of the idea of the pursuit of happiness. Familiar words, easy to take for granted; easy to misconstrue. This idea of the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery. I find it marvelous to contemplate to what an extent, after two centuries, the idea has come to a kind of fruition. It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain awakened spirit. (...) So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist, and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away.'*

V.S. Naipaul

## Key words

- actor utilitarianism
- anxiety disorders
- bibliotherapy
- emotion
- Epicurus
- functions of affect
- happiness, happy-life years
- mental health, mood disorders
- mood, philosophical counseling
- popular psychology
- positive psychology
- quality of life
- Schopenhauer
- self-help
- substance abuse disorders
- transhumanism
- utilitarianism
- wisdom

# Imperfectly happy

## Dissertation abstract

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This thesis is inspired by the utilitarian ideology that seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers and tries to add to this cause considering three questions: 1) What is the quality of popular happiness advice? 2) Is unhappiness concentrated in people with mental disorders? 3) Does the pursuit of happiness cover all ground?

### *Happiness advice*

What do philosophical and psychological self-help books recommend for leading a happy life and how well does this fit with research findings on conditions for happiness? An analysis of 57 psychological best-selling self-help books in the Netherlands shows that most deal with topics that are well correlated with happiness. This means that there is ground to expect positive outcomes, but some works offer recommendations that do not fit research results and are therefore likely to be counterproductive. Empirical studies show that self-help materials can relieve specific psychological problems, but there are no data confirming the effectiveness of popular advice for a happier life in general.

### *Happiness of people with mental disorder*

How much priority deserves mental health care in the pursuit of greater happiness? Analysis of a large scale panel study in the Netherlands shows that most of the unhappiest people have a mental disorder, and from an utilitarian viewpoint, raising the happiness of these people deserves priority. But not all people with mental disorders are unhappy. Most people with mental disorders feel happy at least often, in particular people diagnosed as having a substance abuse disorder or an anxiety disorder. This does not seem not to be due to distorted appraisal of happiness.

### *Wisdom and negative affect*

Several critics of utilitarianism deem 'wisdom' higher than happiness. Is there a conflict between these values as the stereotype of 'Happy Hans' suggests? Analysis of large scale survey shows that wisdom and happiness are positively correlated. Yet the overlap between the two is so modest that the entities are largely independent. Some adherents of utilitarianism focus on eliminating negative experiences all together. Transhumanists ponder on redesigning the human organism that will give rise to 'more varied experience, lifelong happiness and exhilarating peak experiences everyday'. Likewise, positive psychologists focus on maximizing positive experiences through learning. It is argued that negative emotions serve a critical function in our lives, and will enable us to stay focused on the parts of reality that are necessary for optimal functioning.



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# Introductie

‘De wereld is een ratjetoe van plezierige en onplezierige dingen, in lukrake volgorde. Het verlangen hier een intelligent systeem of patroon in te ontdekken, vloeit in wezen voort uit angst.’ Dit schreef de Britse filosoof Bertrand Russell in zijn zelfhulpboek *De verovering van het geluk*. Als hij gelijk heeft, dan is dit proefschrift over geluk voortgekomen uit angst, de wil om iets meer te begrijpen van een verschijnsel dat zich moeilijk laat vangen. De geruststelling die ik kan bieden is dat Russell zijn observatie zelf niet serieus heeft genomen, want zijn boek bevat advies over hoe we gelukkiger kunnen leven.

De rode lijn in dit proefschrift is, net als bij Russell, de wens een bijdrage te leveren aan groter geluk. Het past daarmee in de utilitaristische filosofie van Bentham, die veronderstelde dat het streven naar het ‘grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal’ de grondslag zou moeten vormen van ethiek. De moraal-filosofie van Bentham heeft zich altijd in een zekere belangstelling mogen verheugen, maar pas in de laatste decennia begint men in de economie, sociologie en psychologie serieus na te denken over de toepassing van dit gedachtegoed in de praktijk.

In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht of wetenschappelijk onderzoek een bijdrage kan leveren aan het toepassen van de ideologie van het utilitarisme in een individualistische maatschappij als de onze. Kenmerkend voor een individualistische maatschappij is dat het leven van burgers zich minder voltrekt langs vooraf vastgelegde kaders en dat het afhankelijker is van individuele keuzes. Burgers hebben meer individuele verantwoordelijkheid gekregen voor hun eigen geluk, en dat vergt specifieke vaardigheden.

Als je een beginpunt zou willen aanwijzen voor de ontwikkeling tot een meerkeuzemaatschappij, dan is het verschijnen van de onafhankelijkheidsverklaring van de Verenigde Staten een goed moment. In 1776 nam de staatsman en latere president Thomas Jefferson de ‘individuele jacht op geluk’ op als één van de vanzelfsprekende grondrechten van de mens. Meer dan twee eeuwen later kunnen we balans opmaken of de jacht op geluk rendeert en waar ruimte voor verbetering zit.

In de verschillende delen van dit proefschrift wordt deze vraag vanuit diverse invalshoeken bekeken. Het eerste deel handelt over de ondersteuning van individuen bij het zoeken naar geluk. Is het plausibel dat geluksadvies effectief is? En is de kennis over geluk voldoende ontwikkeld om de kwaliteit van zelfhulp te verbeteren?

Het tweede deel van het proefschrift gaat over de maatschappelijke ‘bijwerkingen’ van de individuele jacht op geluk. Enigszins gechargeerd kun je zeggen dat een meerkeuzemaatschappij die zich baseert op het idee dat eenieder de smid is van zijn eigen geluk, een uitgewerkte filosofie biedt om de verliezers aan hun lot over te laten. Van deze verliezers kun je afhankelijk van je eigen politieke voorkeur zeggen dat ze een moeilijk leven hebben of moeite met leven, maar feit is dat ze tegenwoordig vaak beschouwd worden als mensen met een individueel tekort dat kan worden beschreven

als een psychische stoornis. Deze stoornissen komen vaak voor in moderne maatschappijen. Dit roept de vraag op of de huidige niveaus van vrede, veiligheid en welvaart in rijke landen wel voldoende worden omgezet in een toename van geluk voor het grootste aantal. In het tweede deel van dit proefschrift worden daarom de relaties tussen geluk en psychische stoornissen onderzocht.

In het derde deel ten slotte wordt dieper ingegaan op de psychologische grondslag van het utilitarisme. Op grond van moderne theorieën over emoties wordt gekeken naar de rol van pijn en plezier in het leven. Ons brein is uitgerust met het vermogen pijn te ervaren, omdat dit een duidelijke functie heeft bij het op koers houden van ons leven. Elk streven naar het vergroten van geluk zal daardoor tegen een natuurlijke grens aanlopen. In het derde deel komt bovendien de vraag of de zoektocht naar geluk andere doelen in het leven voldoende afdekt. Maakt het zoeken naar wijsheid en waarheid mensen gelukkiger? Of zijn dat levensdoelen die niet onder de individuele jacht op geluk geschaard kunnen worden en zijn dit bijkomende, zelfstandige levensdoelen?

### *Zelfhulp en geluk*

Het openingshoofdstuk in het deel over zelfhulp handelt over de verschillende definities van geluk die door vooraanstaande zelfhulpauteurs naar voren zijn gebracht. Dit is op te vatten als een extern gepubliceerde inleiding bij dit proefschrift. Getracht wordt de verschillende definities op twee manieren in een kader te plaatsen. In de eerste plaats gebeurt dit aan de hand van een schema over verschillende opvattingen over kwaliteit van leven. Dit maakt duidelijk dat men soms vergeet onderscheid te maken tussen individuele levensvaardigheden die de kans op geluk vergroten, en het geluk als uitkomstmaat. Dit heeft tot gevolg dat de auteurs van zelfhulpboeken soms eenzijdig aandacht vestigen op individuele vaardigheden, terwijl ze de invloed van omgevingsinvloeden en van gemaakte keuzes veronachtzamen. Ze zullen daardoor eerder aanraden in therapie te gaan dan bijvoorbeeld van beroep te veranderen.

Daarnaast wordt de definitie van geluk tegen het licht gehouden met behulp van psychologische theorieën over emotie. Het maakt veel uit of je geluk opvat als een kortdurende emotie, als een grondstemming of als een globaal oordeel over het leven als geheel. Bij de eerste opvatting is de directe interactie van het individu met zijn omgeving van groot belang, terwijl bij de laatste opvatting de nadruk meer ligt op de gemiddelde zijnswijze van de mens. In de laatste beschouwing komt dus meer nadruk te liggen op de levensvaardigheden van het individu en minder op de invloed van de specifieke omstandigheden.

Zelfhulpauteurs wordt in dit hoofdstuk aangeraden meer aandacht te besteden aan de implicaties van de gekozen definitie van geluk, omdat dit de ruimte voor misverstanden tussen lezer en auteur zal verkleinen. Het vergoot de kans dat lezers het advies op waarde kunnen schatten, wat de effectiviteit van de geboden zelfhulptechnieken kan vergroten.

De theoretische beschouwing over de rol die de definitie van geluk speelt in zelfhulpboeken, wordt in hoofdstuk 2 aangevuld met een meer praktische en empirisch

gevalideerde insteek. Dit hoofdstuk verscheen eerder als introductie van een *special issue* van het *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Geconstateerd wordt dat het beschikbare geluksadvies niet of nauwelijks gebaseerd is op experimenteel onderzoek, dat aantoont dat individuele lezers er daadwerkelijk gelukkiger van worden. Al het geluksadvies blijft onder de korenmaat van *evidence based* werken. Toch is er een duidelijk markt voor geluksadvies, en daarom zou het nuttig zijn de kwaliteit van het beschikbare aanbevelingen te vergroten. De koninklijke weg daartoe, namelijk het experimenteel toetsen van de werkzaamheid, is echter lang en moeilijk begaanbaar. In de afgelopen millennia is zeer veel uiteenlopend geluksadvies geproduceerd en het zou een eindeloze reeks aan vergelijkende experimenten vergen om het beste advies te identificeren. Bovendien zou rekening gehouden moeten worden met de interactie tussen het advies en de persoonlijkheid van de lezer en zijn individuele levensomstandigheden en culturele achtergronden.

In de *special issue* is op een minder betrouwbare, maar snellere manier geprobeerd het kaf van het koren in het geluksadvies te onderscheiden. Gekeken is of het geluksadvies aansluit bij wat bekend is over de manier van leven van gelukkige mensen. Als een geluksadviseur mensen aanraadt zich terug te trekken uit het openbare leven vanwege de onrust die dat met zich meebrengt, terwijl uit wetenschappelijk onderzoek blijkt dat gelukkigen vaker en intensiever participeren in onze maatschappij, dan concluderen wij dat een dergelijk advies waarschijnlijk averechts werkt. Deze ruwe werkwijze is gebruikt om een eerste indicatie te krijgen van de kwaliteit van het advies van de klassieke Chinese filosofieën van het boeddhisme, confucianisme en het taoïsme. Daarnaast is op dezelfde manier gekeken naar de het werk van Epicurus, Arthur Schopenhauer en new age filosofen. In hoofdstuk 2 zijn de resultaten samengevat en wordt de gemeenschappelijk gedachtegang achter de papers geïntroduceerd.

In het derde hoofdstuk over psychologische zelfhulpboeken volg ik gedeeltelijk het stramien dat hierboven is beschreven. Bestrijken de adviezen van psychologische zelfhulpauteurs het terrein dat volgens wetenschappelijk onderzoek relevant is voor geluk? Dit blijkt het geval te zijn. Daarnaast is gekeken naar het bestaande empirische onderzoek naar de effecten van zelfhulpboeken. Die blijken aanzienlijk te kunnen zijn. Het effect hoeft zelfs niet onder te doen voor het effect van het bezoeken van een psychotherapeut. Dit feit toont mijns inziens aan dat het waarschijnlijk zal renderen als de kwaliteit van geluksadvies toeneemt.

Het vierde hoofdstuk gaat over de vraag of moderne lezers houvast kunnen ontleen aan het geluksadvies van de Griekse filosoof Epicurus. De naam Epicurus laat zien hoe onrechtvaardig de geschiedenis kan oordelen, want deze is volgens het Van Dale woordenboek uitgegroeid tot een synoniem van ‘genotzucht’ en de ‘geneigdheid tot zinnelijkheid en wellust’. In werkelijkheid was zijn advies veel meer gebaseerd op het smeden van hechte vriendschappen en het vermijden van pijn, dan op het zoeken naar plezier. In het algemeen lijkt zijn advies behoorlijk adequaat voor moderne lezers. De geschiedenis heeft een karikatuur gemaakt van Epicurus’ denkbeelden.

Hoofdstuk 5 over de Duitse filosoof Arthur Schopenhauer is boeiend, omdat deze vleesgeworden pessimist zijn doorbraak beleefde met een populair boekje over geluksadvies. Zijn raadgevingen over de manieren waarop het leven draaglijk gemaakt kon worden, kwamen er bijvoorbeeld op neer dat mensen zich van anderen zouden moeten afkeren en de eigen superioriteit zouden moeten koesteren, in plaats van vriendschap en de daarbij horende teleurstellingen op te zoeken. Dit soort adviezen laten zich moeilijk verenigen met wat tegenwoordig bekend is over het sociale karakter van gelukkige mensen. Dit bewijst eens te meer dat de populariteit van geluksadvies niet altijd een indicatie biedt voor de kwaliteit ervan.

In het laatste hoofdstuk van het eerste deel kijken we terug op de *special issue* en worden enkele beperkingen opgesomd van het uitgevoerde onderzoek. Er is bijvoorbeeld niet gekeken naar de interactie tussen het geboden advies en de lezer. Het is bijvoorbeeld goed denkbaar dat iemand die gelukkiger wil worden en het geluksadvies van Schopenhauer ter hand neemt, tot de bemoedigende conclusie komt dat hij of zij het eigenlijk veel beter doet in het eigen leven dan deze befaamde filosoof. Misschien werkt dat wel zo bemoedigend dat de lezer de eigen positieve kwaliteiten verder gaat uitbouwen. Ook bevat dit hoofdstuk enkele suggesties voor nader onderzoek.

### *Psychische stoornissen en geluk*

In de hoofdstukken zeven tot en met twaalf wordt de aandacht verlegd van individueel geluksadvies naar de positie van het individu in de maatschappij. De centrale vraag in dit deel is hoe de positieve en negatieve indicatoren voor de kwaliteit van onze maatschappij zich tot elkaar verhouden. Hoe komt het dat de overgrote meerderheid van de bevolking aangeeft zichzelf gelukkig te voelen, terwijl in Nederland tegelijkertijd gedacht wordt dat de kwaliteit van onze maatschappij te kort schiet? Bovendien hebben we te maken met een epidemie van psychische stoornissen. Toen hoogleraar Trudy Dehue in het *Dagblad van het Noorden* op zaterdag 21 juni 2008 werd gevraagd waarom haar boekje over de depressie-epidemie zoveel aandacht had getrokken, gaf ze als antwoord: ‘Als het zo is dat toegenomen welvaart, vrede en persoonlijke vrijheid steeds meer depressieve mensen geeft, dan kun je blijkaar wel ophouden vrede en welvaart na te streven’.

Gelukkig blijkt er op deze redenering iets af te dingen. Een van de bouwstenen ervan is immers dat geluk en psychische stoornissen elkaar uitsluitende grootheden zijn. De hoofdstukken 7 tot en met 12 laten zien dat dit niet het geval is. Voor de lezer moet ik hierbij aantekenen dat deze hoofdstukken niet prettig zijn om achter elkaar te lezen, omdat zij deels overlappen. De reden is dat ik heb geprobeerd de resultaten op verschillende podia onder de aandacht te brengen. De Nederlandstalige artikelen zoeken de discussie met andere wetenschappers en zijn bedoeld om mijn werk in Nederland onder de aandacht te brengen. Ik heb ze in dit proefschrift opgenomen, omdat dit proefschrift hopelijk een divers publiek zal bereiken en de Nederlandstalige stukken een mogelijkheid bieden eens aan dit werk te ruiken.

Hoofdstuk 7 laat zien dat de minst gelukkigen bijna allemaal een psychische stoornis hebben of kampen met de restverschijnselen van een psychische stoornis uit het verleden. Wie mensen bestudeert die zich zelden of nooit gelukkig voelen, krijgt dus bijna uitsluitend te maken met personen met psychische stoornissen. Andersom is het echter niet zo dat gelukkigen bijna nooit een stoornis hebben. Sterker nog, ruim tweederde van degenen met een psychische stoornis uit de algemene bevolking zegt dat ze zich de afgelopen vier weken vaak of voortdurend gelukkig hebben gevoeld. De meeste psychische stoornissen zijn kennelijk niet zo ernstig dat ze onverenigbaar zijn met geluk.

Het geluk blijkt goed verklaarbaar aan de hand van de klinische kenmerken van de stoornis. Mensen met lichtere stoornissen, zoals een enkelvoudige fobie, voelen zich vaker gelukkig. Ook blijkt dat gelukkige personen met een psychische stoornis een grotere kans hebben van hun aandoening te herstellen.

In hoofdstuk 8 is een poging gedaan om de hamvraag te beantwoorden die wordt opgeroepen door het vorige hoofdstuk. Als mensen met een psychische stoornis zeggen dat ze gelukkig zijn, bedoelen ze dan hetzelfde als degenen die geen psychische stoornis hebben? Het lijkt immers niet onwaarschijnlijk dat zij met een psychische stoornis hun verwachtingen over het leven zodanig naar beneden hebben bijgesteld dat ze zichzelf al snel gelukkig vinden. Weten personen met een stoornis waarover ze het hebben als ze zeggen dat ze gelukkig zijn? Deze vraag is niet rechtsreeks te beantwoorden, omdat je geluk nu eenmaal niet objectief kan meten. Je kunt wel kijken of geluk samenhangt met dezelfde omstandigheden en psychologische kenmerken bij mensen met en zonder psychische stoornissen. De validiteit van de geluksmeting kun je beproeven.

De resultaten laten zien dat voor mensen met en zonder stoornis geldt dat zij vaker gelukkiger zijn als ze meer controle hebben over hun omgeving, meer zelfvertrouwen hebben, beter functioneren en minder neurotisch zijn. De meting van geluk gedraagt zich met en zonder stoornis op dezelfde manier en er zijn geen goede redenen gevonden om te twifelen aan het gerapporteerde geluk van personen met een psychische stoornis.

Op grond van het in de vorige hoofdstukken gerapporteerde onderzoek wordt in hoofdstuk 9 een voorzichtige conclusie getrokken. Als het zo is dat het ongeluk voor het grootste deel is geconcentreerd is op degenen met psychische stoornissen, dan verdient het prioriteit om een oplossing te zoeken voor dit probleem wanneer je streeft naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal. Om te onderstrepen hoeveel winst te behalen is op dit gebied, hebben wij berekend hoeveel gelukkige levensjaren in Nederland verloren gaan door psychische stoornissen.

In hoofdstuk 10 volgt een discussie over de implicaties van het onderzoek naar het geluk van mensen met psychische stoornissen. De bevindingen worden met name afgezet tegen de conclusies van het prachtige boek *De depressie-epidemie* van Trudy Dehue. Zij constateert terecht dat het bestaan van depressies gepaard gaat met enorm veel leed, maar het is de vraag of je op grond van dit gegeven kunt concluderen dat er iets grondig mis is met onze individualistische maatschappij. Als je naar de uitkomsten

van geluksonderzoek kijkt, dringt de conclusie zich op dat andere maatschappijvormen een lager rendement hebben wat betreft het geluk van burger.

Dehue laat wel zien dat er ook in onze relatief gelukkige maatschappij nog werelden te winnen zijn. Hoofdstuk 11 gaat erover in hoeverre de positieve psychologie daaraan kan bijdragen. Hoe moeten we bijvoorbeeld aankijken tegen het feit dat in een periode van spectaculaire economische groei, namelijk van 1973 tot 2005 het gemiddelde geluk in ons land met slechts één procent is gegroeid. Dit lijkt goed verklaarbaar door te verwijzen naar de wet van de verminderde meeropbrengsten, maar tegelijkertijd is het de moeite waard deze relatief kleine verbetering op waarde te schatten. Als we de komende honderd jaar erin zouden slagen alle ongeluk dat samenhangt met psychische stoornissen ongedaan te maken, dan zou het gemiddelde geluk in Nederland met 2,6 procent stijgen. Dat lijkt niet veel, maar het zou toch spectaculair zijn.

Het laatste hoofdstuk van dit deel handelt over de maatschappijkritiek van de prominente Britse econoom Richard Layard. Zijn idee dat het verstandig zou zijn een leger van psychotherapeuten te trainen om het gemiddelde geluksniveau te verhogen, lijkt hout te snijden. Tegelijkertijd lijkt hij te somber over de moderne maatschappij, omdat hij psychische stoornissen te gemakkelijk gelijkstelt aan het beleven van invaliderende ellende.

### *Wijsheid en het belang van negatieve emoties*

In het derde deel van dit proefschrift ga ik dieper in op de grenzen van het utilitarisme. John Stuart Mill zei al in de tijd van Bentham dat hij het bestaan van een ongelukkige wijze als Socrates verkoos boven dat van een gelukkig varken dat zich tevreden in de modder wentelt. Daarmee impliceerde hij dat wijsheid voor mensen misschien nog wel een groter goed is dan geluk. Als dit inderdaad het geval is en als het streven naar wijsheid ten koste gaat van geluk, dan kun je concluderen dat het utilitarisme de verkeerde prioriteiten stelt. Het dertiende hoofdstuk over wijsheid en geluk laat echter zien dat er van de soms veronderstelde tegenstelling tussen wijsheid en geluk weinig overblijft in een empirische studie. Wijsheid blijkt een positieve samenhang met geluk te vertonen. Het verband tussen beide grootheden is echter zo bescheiden dat wijsheid zich slechts zeer gedeeltelijk voegt naar het utilitaristische idee dat geluk het ultieme einddoel is. Geluk en wijsheid zijn tot op grote hoogte onafhankelijke grootheden. Het zoeken naar wijsheid kan een belangrijk levensdoel zijn dat zich niet laat vangen binnen het streven naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal.

In het veertiende hoofdstuk over transhumanisme wordt de vraag gesteld in hoeverre het mogelijk zal zijn het geluk te zoeken buiten de nu bestaande biologische kaders. De zogenaamde transhumanisten voorzien immers dat de mens binnen afzienbare termijn gelukkiger kan worden dankzij genetische manipulatie en artificiële intelligentie. Maar is het beloofde voortdurende geluk met dagelijkse piekervaringen geluk wel zo'n goed idee? Op grond van emotietheorieën kom ik tot de speculatieve



conclusie dat dit niet het geval is. Het veronderstelde perfecte geluk verliest zijn betekenis als het niet is ingebed in een goed leven. Positieve gevoelens die zich hebben los gezongen van de interactie met de omgeving en de mentale toestand van het individu, hebben niet langer een signaalfunctie en verliezen hun betekenis.

Je fantastisch voelen wanneer er verschrikkelijke dingen gebeuren, komt te dicht bij onverschilligheid. De filosoof Frans Jacobs beschrijft hoe dit gevoel ontspoort bij de Griekse Goden:

*‘Kijk naar Zeus, die met een onbewogen gemoed zijn eigen zoon Sarpedon laat sneuvelen voor Troje. In een wanhopige poging om aan de menselijke passies deel te hebben, worden de goden soms verliefd op mensen. Dan kunnen ze zich zorgen maken over het lot van hun geliefden en daarmee hun eigen vreugdeloze bestaan verlichten’.*

Een leven zonder negatieve gevoelens raakt uit koers, en zonder negatieve gevoelens verliest voorspoed zijn betekenis. Ook hier stuit de utilitaristische ideologie op een grens. Het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal blijft alleen praktisch werkbaar wanneer er ook ruimte is voor verdriet, angst, boosheid en andere vormen van ongeluk. Levenskunst is het ongeluk geen grotere plek te geven dan nodig is, maar wie het helemaal probeert weg te halen, zal waarschijnlijk een negatief resultaat boeken.

De meer praktische consequenties van dit gedachtegoed volgen in het slothoofdstuk. Er wordt gekeken naar de positieve psychologie, een stroming die soms even dwangmatig op zoek is naar het stimuleren van het positieve als de transhumanisten. Empirisch onderzoek laat duidelijk zien dat we negatieve emoties nodig hebben om goed te blijven functioneren en dus om duurzame vormen van geluk te bereiken. We moeten nu eenmaal leven met het realiteits- en het lustprincipe zeiden de freudianen al.

Het laatste hoofdstuk kan worden gezien als een extern gepubliceerde slotbeschouwing. Het pakt de belangrijkste thema's uit dit proefschrift nog een keer op en handelt over het meest centrale advies uit de zelfhulp en de positieve psychologie, namelijk het advies om alles van de zonnige kant te bekijken. Het tweede deel van dit proefschrift laat echter zien dat positief en negatief affect voor een aanzienlijk deel onafhankelijk van elkaar zijn, en ook verschillende functies hebben. Dit mondt uit in een belangrijke paradox die het mooist onder woorden wordt gebracht door de Amerikaanse psycholoog Barbara Held, die stelt dat de positieve psychologie het gevaar in zich draagt 'nodeloos negatief te zijn over negativiteit'. Vandaar dat ik mijn proefschrift de titel heb meegegeven van onvolmaakt geluk. Ik denk niet dat onvolmaakt geluk mooier is dan volmaakt geluk, maar het lijkt me verstandig genoeg te nemen met het onvolmaakte als het hoogst haalbare.

## **Deel 1**

### **Zelfhulp en geluk**

## Het misverstand geluk

### Samenvatting

*Advies voor een gelukkiger leven van vooraanstaande academici is ruim voorradig in boekwinkels, maar de kans dat een lezer daarvan profiteert wordt verkleind doordat verschillende auteurs onverwachte definities van geluk gebruiken. Hierdoor kunnen verkeerde verwachtingen opgeroepen worden, zodat de kans groter is dat lezers teleurgesteld afhaken. De auteur pleit er daarom voor een definitie van geluk te gebruiken die gebaseerd is op een positieve stemming. Dit komt het meest overeen met wat lezers op grond van het dagelijks spraakgebruik verwachten. Verder is het belangrijk het verschil tussen positieve stemmingen en emoties expliciet te benoemen. Geluk als emotie ontstaat door een gunstige wisselwerking met de omgeving, terwijl een positieve stemming meer afhankelijk is van de psychologische kenmerken van het individu.*

Dit hoofdstuk is eerder verschenen in het Maandblad Geestelijke Volksgezondheid

De weg naar een gelukkig leven lijkt eenvoudig te vinden. Voor een paar tientjes biedt elke boekhandel reisgidsen aan, geschreven door vooraanstaande deskundigen. Maar zij zijn het niet altijd eens over de eindbestemming. Daardoor bestaat de kans dat de lezer onderweg verdwaalt.

Deze constatering is weinig verrassend. Veel academici stellen zelfhulp gelijk aan list en bedrog. Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 20) stelt bijvoorbeeld dat zelfhulpboeken niet helpen om dun, machtig, rijk en geliefd te worden – en zelfs als dat wel zou lukken, dan nog blijft de lezer even ongelukkig als voorheen. Salerno (2005) houdt de zelfhulphype onder meer verantwoordelijk voor het einde van de romantiek, de teloorgang van het gezin, en het toegenomen alcoholmisbruik. Wie deze stelling onderschrijft, zal een misverstand over de aard van het geluk onbeduidend vinden. Er zijn echter drie redenen om hier toch bij stil te staan. Allereerst is aangetoond dat zelfhulpboeken even effectief kunnen zijn als psychotherapie. Het is verkwisting als je de pareltjes uit het genre op één hoop gooit met lezersbedrog (Bergsma, 2008). De tweede reden is dat zelfhulp een rol speelt in de geestelijke gezondheidszorg (Martinez e.a., 2008). In de zogenaamde *stepped care*-modellen wordt bij milde klachten geprobeerd of de patiënt zich kan redden met zelfhulp, zodat de schaarse middelen gereserveerd blijven voor wie dat het hardst nodig heeft (Cuijpers e.a., 2008). De derde reden is dat het misverstand over de definitie van geluk niet alleen voorkomt in zelfhulpboeken. In de databank van de *World Database of Happiness* staan een kleine duizend meetinstrumenten voor geluk als tevredenheid over het eigen leven (Veenhoven, 2009a). Het misverstand over geluk komt in uitvergroete vorm voor in academische geschriften.

### *1.1 Definities van geluk*

Ik wil hier eerst laten zien waar het misverstand over geluk in zelfhulpboeken uit bestaat en daarna een oplossing aan de hand doen aan de hand van emotietheorieën. Als motto neem ik een uitspraak van Jaap van Heerden (2007, p. 142): ‘Waar hebben wij het over?, is een vraag die van nature vooraf zou moeten gaan aan elke hypothesevorming.’ Als uitgangspunt heb ik vier invloedrijke populaire boeken over geluk gekozen. Jan Walburg, voorzitter van de Raad van Bestuur van het Trimbos-instituut, maakt in *Mentaal vermogen; investeren in geluk* (2008) onderscheid tussen positieve gevoelens en duurzaam geluk. Dat laatste bestaat niet alleen uit positieve gevoelens maar ook uit een ‘positieve beoordeling van het leven’ en is verbonden met ‘een zinvol en productief leven’ (p. 14). Het woord duurzaam heeft bij Walburg deels een morele betekenis. Het geluk van de één moet niet ten koste gaan van dat van een ander. Het woordje duurzaam verwijst naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal (Bentham, 1789).

De geluksonderzoeker Sonja Lyubomirsky geeft in haar zelfhulpboek *De maakbaarheid van het geluk* (2008), niet zozeer een definitie van geluk, maar heeft het over een gevoel; de ‘ervaring van vreugde, tevredenheid en welzijn, gekoppeld aan een gevoel dat het leven goed is, zinvol en de moeite waard’ (p.49). Ook zij gebruikt de

toevoeging duurzaam, maar nu niet in een morele betekenis. Zij wil het geluk verhogen op een manier zodat het bestand is tegen gewenning. Want je prettig voelen is voor de meeste mensen niet zo'n kunst. Opslag krijgen of een nieuwe auto kopen geeft even een goed gevoel, maar door gewenning is de vreugde snel afgevlakt. Duurzaam geluk is bij Lyubomirsky een fijn gevoel dat bestand is tegen gewenning en dus aanhoudt.

Martin Seligman, de intellectuele vader van de positieve psychologie (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) geeft in *Gelukkig zijn kun je leren* (2002) een andere draai aan het begrip geluk. Hij gebruikt het als een 'losse aanduiding' voor 'alle doelen van de positieve psychologie' (p. 328). De positieve psychologie bestudeert positieve emoties en positieve eigenschappen, zoals competenties en deugden en positieve instituties, zoals democratie, hechte families en vrij onderzoek, die de deugden steunen, die op hun beurt de positieve emoties sturen. Geluk is bij Seligman niet primair een positief gevoel, maar eerder een synoniem van een deugdzaam leven. Dit is een positie die terugrijpt op die van veel klassieke filosofen (Annas, 1993).

Tal Ben-Shahar, hoogleraar positieve psychologie in Harvard, beschrijft in *Gelukkiger* (2007) geluk als het uiteindelijke doel van alle menselijke strevingen. 'Ik definieer geluk als 'de alomvattende ervaring van genot en betekenis'. Een gelukkig persoon heeft positieve emoties en ervaart haar leven als betekenisvol. De definitie heeft geen betrekking op een enkel moment, maar op de totaliteit van de ervaring; iemand kan op een gegeven moment emotionele pijn ervaren, maar over de hele linie genomen nog steeds gelukkig zijn.' (p. 52)

Bovengenoemde schrijvers maken allen duidelijk dat een gelukkig leven gelijk staat aan het goede leven, maar ze verschillen van mening over wat dat goede nu precies is. We kunnen dit oplossen door het begrip geluk terug te brengen tot de oorspronkelijke betekenis. Daarna kunnen we moderne emotietheorieën naast het geluksonderzoek leggen, waardoor het begrip duidelijker vorm krijgt.

## 1.2 Geluk volgens het woordenboek

Het grote basiswoordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal WNT<sup>1</sup> (De Vries e.a., 1882-1998), dat het geschreven Nederlands van bijna vijf eeuwen (1500-1976) in kaart brengt, geeft drie gebruikelijke betekenissen van geluk.

### **Geluk**

1) *Abstract*. De gunstige loop der omstandigheden, de voorspoed die iemand zonder eigen toedoen te beurt valt; met het bijdenkbeeld, dat men er niet op vertrouwen kan, omdat het ieder oogenblik kan veranderen.

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<sup>1</sup> Het WNT gebruikt de oude spelling, maar ik gaf hier de voorkeur aan boven de moderne beschrijving van Van Dale, dat op zich dezelfde definities geeft van geluk, maar dat om voor mij onnavolgbare redenen de lat voor het geluk hoger heeft gelegd. Van Dale spreekt alleen van geluk wanneer alle wensen zijn bevredigd, zonder de toevoeging redelijke.

2) *Concreet*. — 2a In collectieve opvatting. Het geheel der gunstige omstandigheden, die iemand te beurt vallen; de aangename toestand waarin men verkeert, wanneer men al zijne redelijke wenschen bevredigd ziet. 2β Bij beperking. Eéne bepaalde gunstige omstandigheid, een gunstig toeval, een aangenaam voorval, eene blijde gebeurtenis.

3) *Overdrachtelijk*. Het behaaglijk gevoel van dengene, die al zijne redelijke wenschen bevredigd ziet en zich verheugt over het lot dat hem te beurt is gevallen.

Deze betekenissen vallen uiteen in enerzijds gelukkige omstandigheden (mazzel) en anderzijds in het gevoel dat optreedt als het in het leven meezit. Deze laatste betekenis sluit waarschijnlijk het beste aan bij de verwachtingen van mensen die een zelfhulpboek over geluk kopen. Lyubomirsky blijft van de vier besproken auteurs het dichtst bij deze definitie. De toevoeging van Walburg over de normen en waarden die hij als uitgangspunt neemt, zal veel lezers verrassen. De definitie van Ben-Shahar wijkt op een andere manier af. De positieve emoties uit zijn definitie verwijzen naar geluk, maar het globale oordeel waar hij het over heeft, kan waarschijnlijk beter gevangen worden onder de noemer levensvoldoening. Seligmans opvatting over geluk die primair gestoeld is op deugdelijkheid, sluit helemaal niet aan bij het dagelijks spraakgebruik.

We kunnen al deze verschillende betekenissen nader duiden als we ze ordenen in een schema waarin opvattingen over geluk worden ingedeeld aan de hand van twee tegenstellingen (Tabel 1; Veenhoven, 2000). De eerste tegenstelling heeft betrekking op de kansen op geluk versus het bereikte resultaat, de tweede op de kenmerken van de externe omstandigheden of van het individu. Alle vier de hokjes in het schema worden wel beschreven met het woord geluk, maar als we het woordenboek volgen dan komt het vakje rechtsonder het meest in aanmerking.

**Tabel 1** Vier opvattingen over kwaliteit van leven

|                   | <b>Extern</b> | <b>Intern</b>     |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>Kansen</b>     | Leefbaarheid  | Levensvaardigheid |
| <b>Uitkomsten</b> | Nut           | Geluk             |

### 1.2.1 Leefbaarheid

Het kwadrant linksboven in de tabel verwijst naar de gunstige omstandigheden die genoemd worden in de eerste betekenis van het woordenboek. Omdat het hier gaat om de externe kansen, kun je hier denken aan zaken als de beschikbaarheid van eten, veiligheid, onderwijs, democratie en de afwezigheid van corruptie. Maar waar het woordenboek uitgaat van gelukkige spellen van het lot, verwijst het begrip

leefbaarheid naar structureel gunstige omstandigheden. Onze schrijvers over geluk laten deze definitie links liggen.

#### 1.2.2 Nut

Het kwadrant linksonder in de tabel verwijst naar de opvatting dat het leven ergens goed voor moet zijn. De definitie van Seligman sluit hierbij aan: je bent gelukkig als je veel goede werken verricht, maar het is niet uit te sluiten dat je je daarbij slecht voelt. Dit lijkt mij een te misleidende opvatting van geluk om aan een algemeen publiek te presenteren. Als Walburg benadrukt dat we niet alleen onze eigen geluk, maar ook dat van anderen moeten vergroten, dan maakt ook hij gebruik van elementen uit dit kwadrant. Het verschil met Seligman is dat Walburg steeds expliciet aangeeft dat dit een morele keuze is.

#### 1.2.3 Levensvaardigheid

Het kwadrant rechtsboven uit de tabel verwijst naar levenskunst, de individuele vaardigheid om het beste te maken van uiteenlopende omstandigheden. De vier zelfhulpboeken richten zich allemaal primair op het vergroten van deze vaardigheid, maar benoemen dit aspect niet expliciet, hoewel het boek van Walburg een gunstige uitzondering op deze regel is. Walburg gebruikt de woorden ‘mentaal vermogen’ zelfs als titel. Er moet echter één belangrijke kanttekening gemaakt worden bij het versterken van levensvaardigheden; ze kunnen de kansen op geluk vergroten maar ze bieden geen garanties. In de hel voelt ook een levenskunstenaar zich beroerd.

#### 1.2.4 Geluk

Het overblijvende kwadrant verwijst direct naar de derde betekenis van het woordenboek als behaaglijk gevoel. Dit is de subjectieve ervaring van het leven, die ook aangeduid kan worden als levenstevredenheid, subjectief welbevinden, levensvoldoening of geluk. Omdat deze betekenis het meest aansluit bij de verwachtingen van het algemene publiek, pleit ik ervoor het woord geluk in zelfhulpboeken alleen te gebruiken in deze betekenis.

### 1.3 *De duur van het geluk*

Tabel 1 bevestigt dat de definitie van Seligman misleidend is. De andere drie auteurs gebruiken een betekenis die goed aansluit bij het woordenboek, hoewel ze soms levensvaardigheden en de uitkomst door elkaar halen. Ook denken ze niet allen hetzelfde over de duur van het positieve gevoel. Dit verschil kan verduidelijkt worden met emotietheorieën. Je kunt geluk begrijpen als een vluchtige emotie, als een wat langer aanhoudende stemming of zelfs als de positieve waardering van het eigen leven als geheel. Duur en intensiteit van gevoel zijn omgekeerd evenredig (Parkinson e.a., 1996). Geluk als emotie is een diep doorleefde blijdschap, een kortstondig hoogtepunt van opperste gelukzaligheid. Als stemming is geluk een rustig gevoel van blijdschap en tevredenheid. Geluk als globaal oordeel over het eigen leven houdt in dat men na

weging van de hoogte- en dieptepunten en de perioden daartussenin tot de conclusie komt dat het allemaal zeer de moeite waard was. Dit laatste kun je ook levensvoldoening noemen; een cognitief oordeel over de kwaliteit van het eigen bestaan (Veenhoven 2009b).

### 1.3.1 Geluk als emotie

Volgens Frijda (1988) bestaan emoties uit drie componenten. In de eerste plaats zijn het gevoelens dat het goed of fout gaat. Volgens filosoof Spinoza geeft blijdschap aan dat het leven goed is zoals het nu is en dat de levenskracht toeneemt, terwijl droefheid betekent dat het niet goed gaat en de levenskracht belemmerd wordt. Andere theoretici onderschrijven deze pijn-plezierdimensie (Scherer, 2005). Het tweede aspect van de emotie is de neiging tot handelen. Verliefdheid spoort aan om dicht bij de geliefde te zijn, angst doet vluchten, boosheid roept de wil op de ander kwaad te berokkenen, en verdriet geeft de neiging om zich uit de omgeving terug te trekken. Frijda noemt dit gedrag-oproepende aspect van emoties de actietendens. Geluk geeft aan dat het leven goed is zoals het nu is en dat er niets veranderd hoeft te worden.

Het derde aspect van emoties is de waarneming van de actietendens. Men heeft niet alleen een negatief gevoel en de neiging om erop los te slaan, men merkt ook dat deze geneigdheid optreedt. Evenzo is verliefdheid, behalve vlinders in de buik en de neiging iemand tegen zich aan te houden, ook de waarneming van deze impuls. De zelfwaarneming is een belangrijk bestanddeel van emoties. Verlegenheid zou lang niet zo vervelend zijn als het niet gepaard ging met een te scherp zelfbewustzijn. Een mens heeft niet alleen emoties, maar gaat er ook mee om.

Frijda (1988) definieert emoties als volgt: het zijn ‘vormen van relationele actiebereidheid, hetzij in de zin van tendensen om een relatie met de omgeving tot stand te brengen, te onderhouden of te onderbreken, hetzij als een vorm van relationele bereidheid als zodanig’ (p. 48-49). Frijda vat een emotie op als een piek in het emotionele functioneren, waarbij het gevoel ‘stuurvoorrang’ krijgt; het onderbreekt het lopende gedrag en neemt de controle over. De emotie geluk heeft in deze opvatting betrekking op de meest positieve emoties waarbij de normale stroom van de interactie met de omgeving wordt onderbroken en het gevoel de overhand neemt. Dit fijne gevoel gaat al dan niet gepaard met een toegenomen activiteit. In het eerste geval is sprake van een overheersing door het sympathische zenuwstelsel en zou je met Frijda kunnen spreken van een ‘vrije activatie’: er is sprake van een overdaad aan gedrag dat niet specifiek gericht is op het verdedigen van een bepaald belang. Denk aan de vreugdedans van een voetballer die net een doelpunt heeft gescoord, en die niet meer opgaat in de loop van het spel.

De andere pool van de blijdschap is het rustige welbehagen. Je doet even een stapje terug uit de lopende interactie met de omgeving en leunt dan tevreden achterover en geniet van het goede dat je ten deel is gevallen. Deze betekenis wordt misschien het best gedekt door het woord gelukzalig. Je hebt het idee dat de toestand in de wereld geheel overeenkomstig je eigen wensen is en geniet daar ten volle van.



Geluk kan dus omschreven worden als een intens positief gevoel dat al dan niet gepaard gaat met toegenomen activiteit. Daarbij komt het besef dat je het op dat moment prima getroffen hebt. Dit zelfbewustzijn maakt dat we bij mensen wel van geluk spreken, maar bij dieren alleen van een prettig gevoel (Crombag & Van Dun, 1997).

De vier ‘geluksschrijvers’ richten zich echter geen van allen op het vergroten van kortdurende gelukkige emoties. Mogelijk laten momenten van opperste gelukzaligheid zich moeilijk plannen. Een probleem is bijvoorbeeld dat geluk als emotie slechts kort aanhoudt, omdat het emotionele systeem zo is ingesteld dat je snel went aan prettige omstandigheden (Frijda, 1987). De populaire geluksboeken gaan ervan uit dat het hooguit lukt om de gevoelstemperatuur wat te verhogen en als dat momenten van gelukzaligheid oplevert, is dat mooi meegenomen, maar zeker niet het hoofddoel. Geluk moet duurzaam zijn, zeggen Lyubomirsky en Walburg expliciet en Ben-Shahar en Seligman impliciet.

Dat de zelfhulpauteurs de positieve pieken in het emotionele beleven negeren, is een keuze. Bijvoorbeeld Frijda en Sundararajan (2007) bespreken de mogelijkheden om de emotiebeleving te verfijnen. Dit kan door een mentale houding te kweken die gekenmerkt wordt door zelf-reflexiviteit, onthechting en terughoudendheid.

Ook is het de moeite waard te onderkennen dat veel uitspraken over geluk uit de zelfhulpboeken samenhangen met de door de auteur gekozen definitie. Lyubomirsky schrijft bijvoorbeeld dat de levensomstandigheden nauwelijks van belang zijn voor het geluk, maar dat dat niet geldt voor de emotionele hoogtepunten. Het vreugdedansje voert de voetballer alleen op als hij gescoord heeft.

### 1.3.2 Geluk als stemming

De stemmingen vormen naast emoties de tweede dimensie van het affectieve systeem. Parkinson e.a. (1996) beschrijven drie aspecten die kunnen differentiëren tussen emoties en stemming. Het eerste facet is de duur. Of zoals het in de DSM-IV staat uitgedrukt: de stemming weerspiegelt het emotionele klimaat en de emoties het weer. Emoties zijn kortdurende reacties, terwijl een stemming langer aanhoudt. Een tweede verschil heeft betrekking op het beloop. Stemmingen komen en gaan geleidelijk, terwijl emoties een snelle heftige opkomst hebben en in de regel weer snel afvlakken. In technische termen kun je zeggen dat de stemming chronisch of tonisch is, terwijl emoties acuut of fasisch zijn. Het derde verschil is dat emoties intenser gevoeld worden dan de stemming. Opperste gelukzaligheid is krachtiger dan de aangename gloed van tevredenheid. Het verschil in intensiteit is echter niet absoluut. Zo gaat een ernstige depressie gepaard met langdurige, intensieve neerslachtige stemming. Lewis Wolpert (1998) vat dit kernachtig samen als hij zegt dat zijn depressie voor hem erger was dan de dood van zijn vrouw.

Welke psychologische processen gaan schuil achter de verschillen tussen stemming en emotie? Over deze theoretische vraag bestaat meer onenigheid. Gemeenschappelijk is het idee dat emoties een gevoelsmatige reactie zijn op de gebeurtenissen in het hier en nu, terwijl het gevoel zich bij een stemming van uitlokkende omstandigheden heeft

losgemaakt. De stemming heeft zich niet specifiek ergens op gericht, maar heeft vooral betrekking op de manier waarop iemand in het leven staat (Frijda, 1988; Thayer, 1996). De stemming heeft ook een minder duidelijke relatie met gedragstendenzen (Gross, 1998).

Morris (1992) stelt dat emoties reacties zijn op gebeurtenissen in de omgeving en dus informatie verschaffen over de interactie van het individu met de omgeving, terwijl stemming aangeeft hoe de toestand van het individu is. In deze optiek signaleert de emotie geluk een fantastische gebeurtenis en de stemming geluk dat de persoon tevreden is met zichzelf en het gevoel heeft dat hij of zij tegen het leven is opgewassen.

Dit alles wordt bij elkaar gebracht door Parkinson e.a. (1996): 'Mood is an undirected evaluative mental state which temporarily predisposes a person to interpret and act towards a wide variety of events in ways according with its affective content.' Met andere woorden: de stemming is een niet-permanente, cognitief-motivationele dispositie met evaluatieve kenmerken. De stemming is al dan niet plezierig, duurt doorgaans langer dan enkele seconden, en verandert doorgaans geleidelijk in plaats van dat ze een duidelijk beginpunt heeft. Deze omschrijving biedt aanknopingspunten iets meer te zeggen over geluk als stemming. Het is duidelijk dat geluk een positief gewaardeerde stemming is, die het mogelijk maakt om plezier te beleven aan een grote variëteit aan gebeurtenissen, of in ieder geval om zich prettig te voelen bij deze uiteenlopende zaken. Bovendien is de laatste jaren duidelijk geworden dat een positieve stemming met ander gedrag gepaard gaat dan een negatieve stemming. Fredrickson (2001) heeft in dit verband de *broaden and build*-theorie van positief affect naar voren gebracht. Positieve stemmingen en emoties zetten het licht op groen om te exploreren, nieuwe dingen te leren en sociale netwerken te versterken (Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999).

De populaire geluksboeken nemen positieve stemmingen en niet positieve emoties als uitgangspunt. Misschien zijn de veranderlijke gelukkige emoties onvoldoende verenigbaar met de door de auteurs zo vurig gewenste duurzaamheid. Ben-Shahar maakt dit het duidelijkst door expliciet te spreken van geluk dat kan aanhouden als iemand zich slecht voelt. De auteurs lijken geluk op te vatten als *Grundstimmung*, de stemming die het meest typerend is voor een bepaalde persoon. Ten opzichte van de betekenis van het woordenboek heeft deze opvattingen als nadeel dat niet langer verwezen wordt naar de meest intensieve momenten van persoonlijk welbevinden, maar naar de achterliggende grondtoon van het gevoel en de positieve consequenties daarvan (Lyubomirsky e.a., 2005).

De keuze voor de positieve *Grundstimmung* als synoniem voor geluk heeft bovendien als consequentie dat de interactie van de persoon met de omgeving minder belangrijk wordt. Als de gemiddelde levensomstandigheden in een land niet ellendig zijn, dan verwijst de *Grundstimmung* primair naar een goede mentale conditie of de persoonlijkheid van het individu. De populaire boeken over geluk proberen niet de lezer enkele piekervaringen te laten beleven, maar in plaats daarvan een steuntje in de rug te geven bij het vergroten van de mentale fitheid. Zoals gezegd, erkent Walburg dat het meest expliciet door te spreken over mentaal vermogen. De andere auteurs lopen

echter het risico dat lezers zich bekocht voelen, omdat zij onder de belofte van geluk aan hun mentale fitheid moeten werken.

De kans op frustratie is waarschijnlijk het grootst voor mensen die het minst gelukkig zijn. Ongelukkige personen blijken immers meer naar veranderingen te streven dan gelukkige mensen. Zij willen graag leuker werk, meer opleiding en een betere gezondheid. Ook op andere gebieden hebben zij meer onvervulde wensen (Veenhoven, 2009a). Deze mensen worden in de besproken adviesboeken aanbevolen met zichzelf aan de slag te gaan. Dehue (2008) stelt daarbij de vraag of deze individualistische benadering mensen in ongunstige omstandigheden niet tekort doet. Het is natuurlijk positief als het lukt de mentale fitheid van mensen te vergroten, maar het lijkt een reëel gevaar dat het gevoel wordt versterkt dat ongeluk je eigen schuld is – en dat kan onrechtvaardig zijn.

### 1.3.3 Geluk als levensvoldoening

Met het beschrijven van geluk als emotie of als stemming is het kwadrant geluk uit tabel 1 nog niet geheel afgedekt. Geluk kan ook verwijzen naar een globaler oordeel over het leven als geheel, waarbij het leven met alle bijbehorende hoogte- en dieptepunten wordt gewogen (Bergsma, 1995). Dit aspect van geluk is het best te vangen onder het kopje levensvoldoening. Dit aspect komt bijvoorbeeld terug in de geluksopvatting van Walburg als hij rept van een productief en betekenisvol leven.

Levensvoldoening wordt opgevat als een affectief of cognitief oordeel over de kwaliteit van bestaan als geheel. Het oordeel is affectief wanneer het intuïtief en op gevoel gegeven wordt, en cognitief wanneer het tot stand komt aan de hand van een bewust oordeel over in hoeverre bepaalde verlangens zijn bevredigd. Geluk als levensvoldoening is in de cognitieve variant sterk afhankelijk van de gebruikte standaarden en te beïnvloeden door de inschatting van anderen en algemeen aanvaarde standaarden over het goede leven (Veenhoven, 2009b).

De cognitieve variant van levensvoldoening is in de zelfhulpboeken over geluk meestal dominant. Er wordt over het algemeen veel aandacht besteed aan de manier waarop de lezer tegen zichzelf en de wereld aankijkt. Lyubomirsky heeft bijvoorbeeld verschillende dankbaarheidsoefeningen in haar boek opgenomen, die ten doel hebben de lezer er bewuster van te maken bij welke aspecten van het leven al voldaan is aan bestaande standaarden. Walburg geeft onder meer het advies optimistischer tegen de wereld aan te kijken. De nadruk op de cognitieve variant van levensvoldoening heeft echter twee nadelen. Ten eerste sluit deze opvatting minder goed aan op de betekenis van geluk in het woordenboek. Ten tweede wijzen de beschikbare data over wanneer mensen gelukkig zijn, er eerder op dat sprake is van een affectief oordeel (Veenhoven, 2009b).

Dat sommige geluksauteurs toch veel nadruk leggen op het cognitieve aspect van levensvoldoening, heeft misschien te maken met het feit dat het geluk daardoor meer maakbaar wordt. Seligman zei bij de bijeenkomst ‘Geluk in uitvoering’ op 24 november 2006 in Amsterdam dat hij tot zijn definitie van geluk is gekomen, omdat hij niet gelooft dat de affectieve dimensie van geluk zich wezenlijk laat verbeteren

(persoonlijke mededeling). De zelfhulpauteur die levensvoldoening in zijn definitie opneemt, voegt een element aan de betekenis van geluk toe dat niet terugkomt in het woordenboek en dat waarschijnlijk niet prominent is in de beleving van mensen. Dat leidt tot verwarring en het concept wordt op deze manier ook minder helder en vatbaarder voor vertekeningen (Veenhoven, 2009b). Het zou eerlijker zijn om geluk duidelijker te omschrijven als een positieve (grond)stemming. Het is dan voor de lezer duidelijker welke weg hem gewezen wordt en de zelfhulpauteur kan beter aangeven wat de mogelijkheden en beperkingen van de gekozen aanpak zijn.

#### *1.4 Een metafoor van de ziel*

Bij wijze van afsluiting wil ik de rol van geluk in iemands leven verduidelijken met een metafoor. Aristoteles vergeleek de functie van de ziel in het menselijk organisme met die van een schipper op een zeilschip (Oatley, 1992, p. 12). In deze vergelijking zouden de positieve en negatieve gevoelens fungeren als een soort kompas. Een emotie treedt op als de belangen van het schip acuut in het geding zijn. Het kan bijvoorbeeld zijn dat gevaar dreigt en dat een snelle koerswijziging noodzakelijk is. Het alarmerende gevoel en het noodplan dat direct ten uitvoer wordt gebracht is in deze vergelijking een emotie. Geluk treedt op wanneer belangrijke doelen zijn bereikt of gevaarlijk klippen op het laatste moment ontweken worden.

Geluk als stemming mist zo'n acute aanleiding, maar zegt meer over de staat van het schip in verhouding tot de golven. Een positieve stemming ontstaat als het schip berekend is op de golven die het moet weerstaan, of om het in gebruikelijker termen uit te drukken, als de draagkracht toereikend is voor de draaglast. Een positieve stemming zal overheersen als men over het algemeen tevreden is over zichzelf en de wereld waarin men leeft. Geluk als levensvoldoening voegt daaraan toe dat een algemene afweging wordt gemaakt over de koers en de toestand van het schip. Het gaat niet alleen over de huidige koers, maar om een globaal oordeel over de reis tot nu toe, en over het verwachte traject voor de toekomst.

Het zwaartepunt van de besproken geluksadviseurs ligt bij geluk als stemming. Deze keuze is vanuit de emotietheorie gezien eenzijdig, omdat losse gelukkige emoties uit het zicht verdwijnen, en daarmee de directe interactie met de omgeving. De intensieve beleving die volgens het woordenboek geassocieerd wordt met het woordje geluk krijgt daardoor weinig aandacht. In plaats daarvan staan de levensvaardigheden van het individu centraal. De geluksadviseurs lopen daardoor het gevaar dat ze mensen aanmoedigen aan zichzelf te werken, terwijl de lezer misschien wel in omstandigheden verkeert die voor iedereen moeilijk te hanteren zouden zijn.

Het verdient daarom aanbeveling beter te onderscheiden wanneer zelfhulp zich richt op de levensvaardigheden en wanneer op het beleven van geluk. Wie met een zelfhulpboek probeert de mentale fitheid van lezer te verhogen onder het mom van een cursus in geluk, belooft misschien meer dan gezien de levensomstandigheden van de lezer gerechtvaardigd is.

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## The advice of the wise

### Introduction to the special issue on advice for a happy life

#### Summary

*The demand for happiness advice is vast and many different thinkers have offered their views. This special issue presents a cross section of happiness counseling through the ages and considers the advice by classic Chinese philosophers, Epicurus, Schopenhauer, as well as contemporary New Age thinkers and self-help authors. The papers follow three leading questions: 1) What is recommended for leading a happy life? 2) How does this advice fit in the worldview of the author and into a social, cultural and historical context? 3) Are the recommendations in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness? There are common themes in advice for a happy life but also much contradiction, and some honoured philosophers offer advice that can harm happiness if it is taken to heart by present day readers.*

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## *2.1 Demand for advice*

‘Animals are happy as long as they have health and enough to eat.’ This is the famous opening remark by Russell (1930) in his self-help book *The Conquest of Happiness*. He adds that humans should have the same propensity, but lack it. For almost everybody happiness is a goal in life, but food and health do not guarantee its attainment. We can enjoy life in spite of ill health and adversities.

There is no way of knowing whether Russell was right about the happiness of animals, but he is certainly right in his observation regarding humans. Human happiness is not the simple product of favorable circumstances. Happiness is in part a consequence of making the right choices. The pursuit of happiness is not easy and hence man has always sought advice on how best to attain happiness.

Our increasingly changing modern society that is based on the individual pursuit of happiness has enhanced the need for happiness advice. Once predestination governed a traditional life and life choices were restricted. Today people often have a wide range of options available. Individual choices can make the difference between happiness and misery, but it is difficult to foresee the consequences of such choices. Therefore it is understandable that people seek counseling in their pursuit of happiness.

## *2.2 Plan of this special issue*

This issue sets out to chart the field of happiness counseling. The first aim is to give an idea of what is recommended for leading a happy life and to get an overview of the similarities and differences in the counsel that is provided. It will appear that there are more differences than similarities. This raises the question as to why recommendations differ so much, and this leads to the second aim of this issue: to get an overview of the logic underpinning these divergent recommendations. To that end we will explore the contexts in which these ideas emerged, and look at the intellectual history and the wider social and cultural background of the ideas. The fact that the various recommendations differ so much also raises questions regarding their applicability. Will we really become happier if we live up to the advice handed out by the various experts? This leads to the third aim of this issue, that is: an evaluation of the reality value of the various types of advice on offer today and in the past. Thus we also consider to what extent the various types of recommendations for a happy life fit the conditions for happiness observed in empirical research.

## *2.3 Approach*

In this special issue we consider a broad range of happiness advice. The papers describe cases drawn from different cultures, different periods in history, and from different intellectual traditions. Together the papers give a cross section of important players on the happiness advice market, but the picture is by no means complete. The



present analysis is limited to some prominent examples. The different advisers have been—or still are—influential.

The papers about Epicurus (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008) and Schopenhauer (Schalkx & Bergsma, 2008) deal with concrete advice from individual philosophers for ways of thinking and behaving. The other papers discuss schools of thought. The paper by Guoqing and Veenhoven (2008) compares the advice for a good life provided in three classic Chinese schools of philosophy, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This study limits itself to the earliest writings on these classic ideas. The paper by Berg (2008) focuses on New Age, while Bergsma (2008) discusses the modern genre of psychological self-help books.

### 2.3.1 Leading questions

In each of these articles the following four questions are considered:

- What is recommended for leading a happy life?
- How does this advice fit into the worldview of the author or his or her way of thinking?
- How does the way of thinking fit into a social, cultural and historical context?
- Are the recommendations in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness?

### 2.3.2 Difference from earlier studies

There have been earlier studies about happiness advice, mainly in the tradition of the humanities. These studies often focus on the ideas of one prominent intellectual. Examples are the studies about the guidelines for a happy life provided by Thomas Aquinas (Kleber, 1988), Epicurus (Tielsch, 1978), Kant (O'Connor, 1982) and Karl Marx (Peperzak, 1968). Other studies have a focus on a period in history, for instance the literature and way of thinking in France in the 18th century (Mauzi, 1960), the Middle Ages (Buschinger, 1990) or antiquity (Hufnagel, 2002). Two other studies deal with ideas of happiness presented in fairy tales (Bausinger, 1983) and happiness in the context of personal relationships as presented in popular magazines in the period 1951–1973 (Kidd, 1975).

These earlier studies most often concentrate on the first question in the bullet table given above. Some authors also tackle the relationship between conceptions of happiness or advice and a specific worldview or a social, historical or cultural context, but we were unable to find any study in the bibliography of the World Database of Happiness that examined the reality value of the advice (Veenhoven, 2006). The happiness enhancing or reducing effects of specific ideas is a subject that has been neglected to date.

## *2.4 Results*

### *2.4.1 What is advised?*

Beginning with the earliest happiness advice that has come down to us through human history, we meet considerable divergence. By 500 B.C. Chinese philosophers had already formed three schools in classic Chinese philosophy: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These schools have different views on how one should live. Confucianism inspires people to take care of others and to live a virtuous life. Its central concepts are friendship, family, responsibility, duty, learning, tolerance, conversation and reflection upon oneself. Taoism is much more individualistic and mystical than Confucianism and has little to say about serving society, but more about finding a balance between self and others, and self and nature. People should follow the natural order of things. In Buddhism suffering takes the central role. The world is continually changing, the messages we receive from our senses are illusory and it is impossible to escape suffering, except by seeking liberation from a self-centered existence. This escape is possible by giving up social ties and even pleasant feelings (Guoqing & Veenhoven, 2008).

European philosophers do not agree among themselves about the road to happiness either (Annas, 1993). The early Greek philosopher Epicurus maintained that everybody can reach the state of feeling pleasant by following the ‘four-part cure’: ‘don’t fear God, don’t worry about death, what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure’. Rules number three and four need the most explanation. According to Epicurus feeling good is easy, because absence of pain is enough. All we have to do is to fulfil our desires in a sensible way, so we don’t get hooked on sensory pleasures. Pain is easy to endure, because chronic pain is not very intense and acute pain is not a problem either because it will not last long (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008).

In contrast, the 19th century German philosopher Schopenhauer did not believe in true happiness, and the best possibility one had was a life relatively free from pain. Life is better if one’s complaints are trivial and boredom sets in; since not much good is to be expected from life, it is wise to try to be satisfied with as little as possible, and not to ask for more. Personality is considered an important factor for happiness (Schalkx & Bergsma, 2008).

Modern advice in the tradition of ‘New Age’ is rather diverse, but several common themes can be identified. New Age advice stresses the importance of spirituality, finding one’s true self and attaining self-knowledge. People are advised to trust their gut-feelings and to distrust experts. The need to connect with family, partners and all things in the universe is another theme. Meditation, positive thinking and the need to take control of one’s life are also prominent. The last themes are living healthily and simply (Berg, 2008).

Modern ‘self-help’ authors also form a heterogeneous group. They offer a blend of personal wisdom with ideas drawn from different schools of psychology. In general they seem to be influenced by humanistic psychology. They stress things like self-

actualization, self-understanding, autonomy, tolerance, development of skills and finding meaning and purpose in life (Bergsma, 2008).

#### 2.4.2 Social context of the advice

The different ideas about happiness are not just a consequence of the purely individual preferences of the people who gave the advice. The conditions of living at the time had a strong bearing on the sort of advice given, although the same circumstances also gave rise to different concepts regarding ways to become happy.

Guoqing and Veenhoven (2008) discuss three classic Chinese philosophies: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The first two arose in China about 2,500 years ago, the last was imported from India 500 years after that. Ancient China was an agrarian society, where most people lived in close-knit communities, often in harsh conditions. The happiness advice was primarily aimed at nobility, people who had the means to support philosophers.

Epicurus (341–271 B.C.) lived at a time when philosophy flourished—the Hellenistic period in Greece. It was a time of great social and political upheaval, the mingling of different cultures and the decline of the city-state. Epicurus promised his followers happiness if they would live alongside him in a predictable community called The Garden. His philosophy can be partly understood as a way of dealing with the political instability, wars and dynastic struggles and the feelings of alienation many felt at this time (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008).

The philosophy of Schopenhauer (1788–1860), the founder of pessimism, is by no means a logical consequence of the great social circumstances of his time. It is more likely that Schopenhauer's own place in society was a driving force behind his happiness advice. He was part of the elite and worked in universities, but his ideas did not receive the acclaim that Schopenhauer felt they were entitled to. His social life and relationships did not bring him satisfaction either; his happiness advice can be thought of as a way of convincing himself that what he was missing was not important. Just like the fox decided in the fable of Aesop that the grapes must be sour as he could not reach them (Schalkx & Bergsma, 2008).

The New Age movement and psychological self-help books have gained importance in modern, individualistic multiple-choice societies. New Age thinkers are part of a counter culture that seems to rebel against the rationality and perceived harshness of modern societies. The happiness advice is in part a logical consequence of this position. New Age thinkers give the advice to connect with others, find your true self, distrust experts and live a simple life (Berg, 2008). Psychological self-help authors take an intermediate position between the counter and regular culture. They use ideas and theories drawn from all schools of psychology and are therefore more closely linked to the academic psychology establishment. Yet they take the liberty to cherry pick ideas, often without much concern for empirical data. Self-help authors are not taken very seriously by academic psychologists and are often ridiculed, although several renowned psychologists have written self-help books (Bergsma, 2008).

#### 2.4.3 Intellectual context of the advice

The social background of happiness advisers certainly plays a part in the forming of their views on happiness, and how they counsel happiness, but their view on the world is even more important. The classic Chinese philosophers had different views on life. For Confucius life was about kindness and the concern for the well-being of others. The social group, society and conduct within it played a central part in the thinking of Confucius and it was up to the individual to function well in this context. Confucianism is also characterized by rationalism and optimism. Confucians believe that humans can realize their own ends, through their own ability, power and effort. Happiness is to be achieved by living virtuously. Taoism placed emphasis on Nature. This philosophy is more mystical and deals with the balance between human beings and Nature, between individuals and society, between oneself and other. The laws of Nature are considered all-powerful, so the best option is to follow the ‘Tao’, and not try to change it. Happiness is something that happens to you, when you no longer try to control the circumstances of life. Buddhism teaches that the world is continually in flux, and that people should liberate themselves from a self-centered existence in which suffering is inevitable. Buddhism has a more negative view on life and the ultimate goal of life is to step out of the wheel of life and death, to cease to be reborn. People should give up their illusory desire for happiness (Guoqing and Veenhoven, 2008).

For Epicurus the central goal in life was to feel good. Pleasure—*Hêdonê*—is intrinsically valuable and is the main criterion for all actions. Epicurus is quite pragmatic. He advises people not to fear gods or death. Death ‘is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist.’ (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008).

Schopenhauer was the founder of pessimism. In his view, humankind is lead by the ‘Will’ which manifests on strong desires such as for sex, food, money and company: but these desires can never be fulfilled, and pain and suffering results. Even if you reach satisfaction, it will soon be boring. In essence life is bad, but you can make the best of it in two ways. You can become an artist or try to be an ascetic and repress the desires of the Will (Schalkx & Bergsma, 2008).

An important theme in New Age is the assumption that there is a spiritual dimension that is often described in terms of omnipresent cosmic energy, love and wisdom. The various religions are all based on the same cosmic truth. Two assumptions are basic. The first is holism that refers to the interconnectedness of different elements in the universe. It is impossible to get an idea about what is happening by focusing on elements in a reductionistic way. There is a lot of room for individualism. Personal experience is central in New Age. It is a form of self-spirituality. Happiness is to be achieved by trusting your gut-feelings and finding inner peace (Berg, 2008).

The psychological self-help books also emphasize personal experience. The central theme is that you can feel good about yourself and your life if you put effort into it. The pursuit of happiness is in your own hands. Personal growth, personal relationships and coping with stress are the most central themes. The self-help authors are strongly

influenced by humanistic psychology with its focus on self-actualization and authenticity. Another important theme in self-help is the emphasis on human strengths, something that self-help has in common with the new school of 'positive psychology' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The flaws and weaknesses of the individual receive less attention (Bergsma, 2008).

## *2.5 Usefulness of the advice*

The differences mentioned raise questions about the reality value of all this advice. If the wise disagree so much, at least some of them must be wrong. As announced we have tried to assess the applicability of the recommendations for a happier life by considering the fit with observed conditions for happiness in present day society.

### *2.5.1 Method*

The idea to review the efficacy of happiness advice might seem a bit grandiose. There is a lot that is unknown about the dynamics of individual happiness. What golden standard can be used to judge the happiness advice of others? The answer is that a golden standard does not exist, but there is a wealth of data that allows us to make a correlation between the happiness of an average person and certain conditions of living. For example, for most people a busy social life goes together with a higher level of happiness than a solitary life. These correlations allow us to check indirectly happiness advice. If an adviser tells you to live alone in a cave on a hill, it is not likely that the happiness of the average person who follows the advice will be enhanced.

### *2.5.2 Notion of happiness: enjoyment of life-as-a-whole*

A complication is that different advisers aim at different aspects of the good life, although all advisers in this issue aim at getting us to feel as good about life as possible, when real happiness is not considered possible. The adjective 'good' in the context of quality of life can refer to meeting moral tenets. This can be judged by whether people live up to rules or ideals or whether they live deliberately up to their own life-plan. 'Good' can also refer to hedonistic qualities, life is good as long as it is enjoyed (Veenhoven, 2003).

Hedonism comes in two variants. The first can be described as living pleasantly, by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In this idea the emotions and moods from day to day are the measure for the quality of life. The other hedonistic concept of the good life takes happiness as a standard. In this view individuals have more freedom to attribute meaning to their own feelings. For example, an Australian forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, was interviewed on Dutch television (*De Wandelring*, KRO, 16-04-04) after she had worked for nine years in Rwanda, excavating the victims of the 1994 genocide from mass graves. Her work gave her nightmares, but she did not mind because she felt she had made a meaningful contribution to the surviving relatives of the victims. Pain does not have to be the enemy of a good life in the second hedonistic concept of the good life, because it can be thought of as part of something good, such

as a process towards personal growth, flow or mastering new challenges. In this view happiness is enduring satisfaction with life as a whole (Veenhoven, 2003). This view of the good life as a happy life is a central idea in classic utilitarianism (Bentham, 1789) and in this *Journal of Happiness Studies*. We have used this idea to check the evidence base of the advice.

### 2.5.3 Analogy with evidence based health advice

The central question in this special issue is whether the advice of the wise is likely to enhance hedonistic/utilitarianistic happiness if somebody was to follow the advice in a modern day society. Surprisingly, this is a question that not many scholars have tried to answer with the help of research data. The World Health Organization has used the following definition of health since 1948: ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (<http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/>). Happiness is considered to be an integral part of health by the WHO, but is not treated in the same way as the physical aspects of health. With the help of epidemiologic research it has been shown that habits like a healthy diet, enough exercise, no smoking and modest drinking reduce the risk of several kinds of disease and a lot of effort is being devoted to get people to practice healthy habits (De Ridder, 2003).

The general public is less well educated about the science of happiness. What kind of advice is likely to enhance the enjoyment of life? The World Health Organization does not offer a clue. One could say that we still live in the Middle Ages with respect to happiness. A ‘physician’ in those days gave the advice not to take a bath as a precaution against the bubonic plague, although lack of hygiene was an important contributing factor for catching this deadly disease. Since then empirical investigations have forced physicians to give up their armchair ideas about what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and to come up with evidence-based recommendations.

### 2.5.4 Will happiness advice go through a similar evolution?

If so, this could also enhance the physical aspects of health as well. Happiness can have a positive effect on longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen 2001, Pressman & Cohen, 2005) and a cognitive behavioral intervention to enhance positive, happy thoughts can reduce depression relapse (Fava, Grandi, Zielesny, Rafanelli, & Canestrari 1996). If we want to spread valid ideas about happiness, we may as well start with evaluating existing advice. This special issue can be thought of as an effort to evaluate happiness advice empirically and theoretically; but obviously the studies presented here are limited to a small number of examples.

### 2.5.5 Results

The comparison between the health recommendations in the Middle Ages and modern happiness advice was too bleak. In our limited sample it is apparent that newer advice has a better fit with the empirical data than the older advice, but the older advice certainly has some valuable components. Apparently, individual happiness advisers do

take the trouble to read the modern literature and are not primarily driven by their own moral ideas about the good life.

The classic Chinese philosophies are reviewed by Guoqing and Veenhoven (2004, 2008) following several themes. The first is how valuable life is in itself. A positive view on life correlates positively with happiness. Confucianism and Taoism have such a positive view, and Buddhism has a very negative view. The sense of Buddhism that life can be happy is probably harmful. Buddhism also has a negative view on personal social ties, whereas satisfaction with personal relationships is correlated strongly with happiness. Confucianism rightly recommends an investment in social ties. Taoism takes an intermediate position, and warns against losing individuality. Confucianism perhaps overstates that one should meet social obligations. The views on engagement in society are also divergent. Taoism prefers a retreat to Nature, Buddhism advocates withdrawal from all earthly commitments and Confucianism advises one to be fully involved in society. In modern societies more engaged citizens are happier on average. The central conclusion is that Confucianism offers the best chances for happiness and Classical Buddhism the worst.

Many Epicurian instructions about the good life fit modern correlational data about happiness. Epicurus recognizes the importance of the fulfilment of bio-psychological needs of people. He also is right about the value of intimate relationships and that this is more important than materialism and status. His advice about moderation and varied pleasures is also accurate. His advice about engagement in society is less fortunate. Another shortcoming of Epicurus' happiness advice is that he focused too much on avoiding pain, which led to too much passivity in the pursuit of happiness (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008).

The work of Schopenhauer is characterized by an irony. He recognizes that personality is a very important factor in happiness, but he fails to see the influence of his own personality on his happiness advice. His neurotic nature deprived him of satisfying relationships, but this does not mean that his advice for average readers to stay away from friendship and relationships is justified. Developing social skills and keeping active will make you happier in the long run (Schalkx & Bergsma, 2008).

New Age thinking can be described with the help of ten main recommendations for a happy life. Berg (2008) presents data that suggests that seven recommendations have the potential to enhance happiness: become spiritual, be authentic, know yourself, connect with others, think positively, take control and live healthy. For two recommendations—meditate and follow your gut feelings or intuition—Berg was not able to find evidence whether the advice was beneficial for happiness or harmful. The advice to live a simple life justly warns against too much materialism, but robs people of many pleasures.

Important themes in the psychological self-help books that sell best in the Netherlands are personal growth, personal relations, coping with stress and finding one's identity. Bergsma (2008) concludes that self-help authors search for happiness in directions that show a high correlation with subjective well-being, but there are a lot of recommendations in the self-help literature that are not up-to-date. Self-help is an area

with acknowledged experts and proven psychobabblers and it is up to the reader to make a distinction between the two. There is some indirect evidence to suggest that reading self-help books may be a part of a healthy, active coping style.

## *2.6 Limitations*

The most striking feature of this special issue has been the search for an evidence-base for happiness advice. A discussion of the limitations of this approach can be found in the afterthought in this issue (Bergsma, 2008). The afterthought also contains a sketch of an agenda for future research.



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## Do self-help books help?

### Summary

*Advice for a happier life is found in so-called 'self-help books', which are widely sold in modern countries these days. These books popularize insights from psychological science and draw in particular on the newly developing 'positive psychology'. An analysis of 57 best-selling psychology books in the Netherlands makes clear that the primary aim is not to alleviate the symptoms of psychological disorders, but to enhance personal strengths and functioning. Common themes are: personal growth, personal relations, coping with stress and identity. There is a lot of skepticism about these self-help books. Some claim that they provide false hope or even do harm. Yet there are also reasons to expect positive effects from reading such books. One reason is that the messages fit fairly well with observed conditions for happiness and another reason is that such books may encourage active coping. There is also evidence for the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in the treatment of psychological disorders. The positive and negative consequences of self-help are a neglected subject in academic psychology. This is regrettable, because self-help books may be the most important—although not the most reliable—channel through which psychological insights find their way to the general audience.*

This chapter appeared in the Journal of Happiness Studies

### 3.1 Introduction

Guidance for how to live your life has long been sought in religion and philosophy, but nowadays people also seek advice from psychology. Part of this advice is provided in personal consults with professional psychologists, such as test-psychologists, psychotherapists and mental coaches. This kind of help is typically focused on specific psychological problems or choices in life. Yet most psychological advice for improving the quality of one's life is not obtained in consulting rooms, but picked up from popularizations in the mass media. Psychologists appear frequently on television. Magazines and newspapers often interview psychologists and it is easy to find them on the Internet (Peverelli, 1999; Rabasca, 2000), with more than 12,000 Web sites devoted to mental health (Paul, 2001). There are special interest magazines about psychology for a general audience. Examples are *Psychology Today* (US), *Psychologies Magazine* (UK), *Psychologies* (France), *Psychologie Heute* (Germany), and *Psychologie Magazine* and *Happinez* (Netherlands).

#### 3.1.1 Self-help books

There is also a real abundance of so-called 'self-help books' available in bookstores. For every conceivable mental problem and for every life choice there is guidance in print, from what Meyer (1980) has called the positive thinkers. There are books that explain how one can obtain emotional literacy (e.g., Goleman, 1995; Steiner & Perry, 1997), how to become engaged in activities as a way in which to attain happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), if you should stay with or leave your partner (Kramer, 1997), how to fight depression (Lewinsohn, Munoz, Youngren & Zeiss, 1986), how to stay sane in a crazy world (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1997), how to communicate with your partner (Tannen, 1986, 1990) and what you can and cannot change about yourself (Seligman, 1994). You can even obtain advice whether it is a good idea to kill yourself: Diekstra and McEnery (2001) claim that their book can help a reader to make a more rational decision about life and death.

Starker (1989) counted approximately 3,700 American book titles beginning with the words 'how to', and this figure is only a gross underestimation of the number of self-help volumes available, because the authors are not restricted to this title. The self-help industry is a goldmine. Americans spent \$563 million on self-help books in 2000 (Paul, 2001). For other countries we were unable to find data, but the genre is prominent in almost every bookstore with a section devoted to psychology in Western Europe and the United States. American self-help authors are also popular in China and the former Eastern block in Europe (personal communication with Sergiu Báltătescu from Rumania and Huaibin Jing from China).

Starker (1989) mentions four pragmatic factors that explain the success of the self-help books:

*Cost.* The costs of self-help books are low compared to a consultation with a psychologist.

*Accessibility.* The books are easy available and can be read over a lunch or during a sleepless night.

*Privacy.* A written solution for problems offers the opportunity to work on problems without ‘going public’ or having to speak to a doctor or psychologist.

*Excitement.* Self-help books quite often become best sellers and buying and reading such a book gives you the opportunity to become part of an in-group. ‘There is no shame in finding your G-spot along with everyone else’.

### 3.1.2 Plan of this article

This article describes what self-help books are about and explores the effectiveness of this kind of happiness advice. The first section defines the genre more precisely. For that purpose we will explore what kind of psychology books are sold most often in bookshops and will distinguish the self-help books from other genres. Self-help books are the focus of the rest of the paper.

The next step is a tentative exploration of the readership of these books. Good data are lacking, but the most common themes in self-help books and research of the readers of the Dutch monthly *Psychologie Magazine* give some indications.

The last part of the paper is about the more difficult question of the effectiveness of this advice. An overview of the drawbacks of the genre is given and then we review the available empirical indications of effectiveness.

### 3.2 The nature of self-help books

A dictionary description of self-help is ‘the acts of helping or bettering oneself without the aid of others’. In the context of psychology books self-help is a form of coping with one’s personal or emotional problems without professional help. Therefore, all books that can serve this practical aim are considered self-help books.

#### 3.2.1 Themes in self-help books

In order to get a view of what self-help books are about, we first listed the best-selling psychology books in the Netherlands and next selected the self-help books on that list. We started with ‘best selling’ books since the aim is on books for a large audience and focused on ‘psychological’ books because the focus is on quality of life. This focus on psychology books implies that other kinds of advisory books are left out, in particular the variety of spiritual books and the volumes about physical health, diets and appearance.

The list of best-selling psychology books was made with the help of a Dutch publisher.<sup>2</sup> She had contacted a range of bookstores and asked which psychology books sold best locally in the time period of September 1999 until August 2000. This yielded

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<sup>2</sup> Warnyta Koedijk

57 titles. There might have been a bias in this way of gathering information, but it gives an impression of the kind of subjects that are in vogue with the general Dutch audience. It is not clear whether these results are representative for other Western countries, but it is obvious that many of the American successes on the reader market are being translated and find their way to a Dutch and other audiences.

The best-selling psychology books are sorted on the basis of the first impression the books make on buyers in a bookstore. Two investigators looked at the title, the cover, the texts on the back and read the first few pages. The categorization was based on the central message of the publisher and author(s) for the potential reader. The present author made an ad hoc categorization, and a second rater was used to check the inter-rater reliability for the classification, which was satisfactory ( $r = 0.86$ ).

There is a chance that this procedure does not do justice to the scope of subjects that the authors cover, but on the other hand the messages of the self-help authors are very straightforward. Examples of titles are: *I can think and feel what I want* (Diekstra) *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus* (Gray) and *Don't worry, make money* (Carlson).

#### 3.2.1.1 Growth

The first category is 'personal growth'. It is about the improvement of the self. Other phrases that cover this category are personal efficiency, self-management, art of living and ways to reach your goals. The books are about feeling better and living better. This was by far the largest category with 19 books out of the top 57. One should notice that in most other books self-improvement is an important theme as well, but in those other books the theme is addressed more indirectly.

#### 3.2.1.2 Relationships

The second category is 'personal relations'. This category (nine books) focuses on intimate relationships and has an overlap with the category Communication (five books). The difference is that the first category is more goal-oriented (having satisfying relationships) while the second tries to offer tools to understand and enhance communication abilities. These communication skills can be used for intimate relationships, and in other settings as well.

#### 3.2.1.3 Coping

The third category is 'coping with stress'. These books provide practical ideas on how to find relaxation and rest, in particular in relation to working life. Another theme in this category is to enhance resilience in difficult circumstances. The authors offer interventions that have a cognitive behavioral signature. They help readers to develop an outlook at the world that minimizes stress. This category contains eight books.

#### 3.2.1.4 Identity

The last substantial category is ‘Who am I?’ It contains six books. This section has a large overlap with the Personal growth category, and this overlap was responsible for most of the disagreement between the two raters. Knowing thyself can be thought of as the first step for making the right choices in life and for self-improvement. The difference is that the category ‘Who am I?’ is more oriented towards providing insight and the category Personal growth is more practical. Self-improvement is a secondary goal for the category ‘Who am I?’ However the distinction remains somewhat problematic. For example Goleman’s book about emotional intelligence is insight oriented, but is categorized on the basis of a first impression under the heading Personal growth. The Dutch cover mentions as the subtitle that emotions offer a ‘key to success’.

### 3.3 *Self-help is dominant in bookstores*

All categories of the psychology books mentioned in Table 1 fall into the self-help category except the categories psychotherapy, psychological tests, study-books, (auto)biographies and fiction. The books about psychological tests and psychotherapy are not considered self-help, because they do not help readers to improve or heal themselves, but tell them what to expect when they are tested or receive psychological treatment. The study-books are meant for students and aim at transfer of knowledge. The (auto)biographies and fiction books are not aimed directly at self-help, although the stories may be inspirational. An exception is the autobiographical book by Bergen in which the author describes her own burnout and offers advice for better ways of dealing with stress. Therefore this book is also mentioned under the header stress. Forty-eight out of fifty-seven best selling psychology books fall under the heading self-help.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some authors may object to the loose classification of self-help used in this paper. For example, one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper mentioned that Csikszentmihalyi would be horrified to see his work classified as self-help. Csikszentmihalyi’s work is a long shot from the superficial quick fixes that are characteristic for part of the self-help literature, and the quality of his work is excellent judged by academic standards. His work is more descriptive than practical (Seligman, 2002). However, the sub-title of his book *Flow* is the ‘the psychology of optimal experience’ and it should come as no surprise that readers will buy this book, partly because they want to experience this optimum more often for themselves.

**Table 1** Major themes in psychology books<sup>4</sup>

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**Personal growth** (19 books)

Gray: Get what you want, and want what you have  
Goleman: Emotional intelligence  
Dyer: Not tomorrow, but now  
Beggs: Little book of inspiration  
Knoope: The creation spiral – make wishes come true  
Wilson: Little book of happiness  
Benninga: Get the best out of yourself  
Dyer: Enlighten your life – make dreams come true  
Dyer: No mountain high enough – better functioning, more satisfaction  
MacGraw: Learn to live  
Csikszentmihalyi: The way to flow  
Csikszentmihalyi: Flow  
Diekstra: I can think and feel what I want  
Robbins: Your unknown possibilities – NLP  
Sterk: Think to make yourself strong and confident – handbook for personal growth  
Young: More alive in your life – avoid pitfalls  
Sterk: Space for yourself – more control over your own life  
IJzermans: Obstacles on the way and in your mind – emotion at work  
Bakker: Vitality – enhance your energy

**Personal relations** (9)

Gray: Men are from Mars, women are from Venus  
Norwood: As long as he is happy – about self-sacrifice  
Vanzant: In the meantime; find yourself and the love that you want  
Cleese: How do I survive my family  
Gray: Mars and Venus start over again  
Gray: Love secrets from Mars and Venus  
Carnegie: This is how you make friends  
Gottman: Seven principles for a good relationship  
Forward: Emotional blackmail

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<sup>4</sup> The (more or less literal) English translation of the Dutch titles is used, not the original English titles when they were available. The translations are better suited to conveying the impression the books make on Dutch readers. If the title does not speak for itself, a catch phrase is added after a dash (–). The Dutch titles can be found in Appendix A



## **Coping with stress (8)**

Wilson: Little book of rest

Wilson: Big book of rest

Bergen: Lessons from burn-out

Carlson: Don't make mountains out of molehills at work

Carlson: Don't worry, make money

Bakker: Vitality – enhance your energy

Karsten: Deal with burn-out

IJzermans: Obstacles on the way and in your mind – emotion at work

## **Who am I? (6)**

Millman: The life you have been born for

Vanzant: In the meantime; find yourself and the love that you want

Ball: Dream encyclopedia – dream interpretation

Bolen: Goddesses in every woman

Bolen: Gods in every man

Baanders: I am not sad, I am mad

## **Miscellaneous**

Communication (5)

Child rearing (3)

Fiction (2)

(Auto)biographies (2)

Study books for students (2)

Sleep (1)

Depression (1)

Psychotherapy (1)

Hypnosis (1)

Psychological tests (1)

Spiritual intelligence (1)

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### *3.4 Two dimensions of self-help*

The thematic categories are still too broad for further analysis of the effectiveness of the advice offered. Therefore we divided the group further using two dimensions. The books can be problem-focused or growth-oriented and can be theory-guided or eclectic. The first dimension roughly follows the categories used above. The categories

Personal growth and Who am I? are clearly growth-oriented and the categories Coping with stress, Depression and Sleep are problem-oriented. The other categories or more heterogeneous or fall in the middle of the dimension.

**Table 2** Four kinds of self-help books

|                      | <b>Problem focused</b>                            | <b>Growth-oriented</b>                 |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Theory-guided</b> | IJzermans: Obstacles on your way and in your mind | Csikszentmihalyi: The way to flow      |
| <b>Eclectic</b>      | Wilson: Little book of sleep                      | Gray: Love secrets from Mars and Venus |

Eclectic self-help books use ideas from different schools of thought in psychology; theory-guided books translate ideas from one particular research tradition so that they are suitable for a large audience. Most books are eclectic in nature, but more academically oriented authors often write theory-guided books. Examples are the work of Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi and Bolen. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi are among the founders of the school of positive psychology and Bolen is a Jungian scholar. The ideas of cognitive behavioral psychotherapy is well represented among the theory-guided self-help books.

A surprise might be that the growth-oriented books outnumber the problem-oriented books. In the top 57 of best-selling psychology books there is only one book about overcoming depression and no books that specifically target anxiety disorders or addiction. This could be an artifact of the method used for this selection of self-help books. Our sample was based on the books sold in general bookstores, and self-help books are also distributed by mental health professionals and client organizations. For example the book *In de put uit de put* (Feel bad feel good), a Dutch adaptation by Cuijpers of the anti-depression book by Lewinsohn et al. (1986), sells well in the Netherlands, but is distributed outside bookstores in mental health centers (Cuijpers, personal communication). The guided use of self-help books is sometimes described in the literature as ‘minimal contact psychotherapy’.

The scarcity of best-selling books about psychological disorders in the Netherlands may indicate that people with mental disorders need the guidance of a professional before trying a self-help book. People that seek to enhance their communication skills or their ability to cope with stress do not need such professional support. Perhaps people with mental disorders think that their problems are too serious to be solved by a self-help book. Another explanation is that they might misdiagnose their own problems. Somebody with social phobia might buy a book about communication skills

and somebody with a depressive disorder might buy a book to enhance personal relationships.

### 3.5 Readership

What type of people buy self-help books? There is not much research available to answer this question, but Starker (1989) thinks that self-help is an essential part of American culture. Self-help books started more than 200 years ago with a new conception of society based on what Jefferson called the individual 'pursuit of happiness' in the Declaration of Independence. The rigid, fixed-class systems of European countries were replaced by an open system in which 'a man could hope to rise in station according to his merits and abilities, and to be judged solely on the basis of his individual accomplishments' (Starker 1989, p 169). Obstacles to upward social mobility were removed and people felt that they also could be part of the American dream, if only they would know how. Self-help books offered appropriate guidance.

This individualistic background is also recognizable in most of the self-help books that sell well in the Netherlands. There is no reason to think that the people that buy this kind of self-help book are typically chronically unhappy or mentally disturbed. Wilson and Cash (2000) conducted a survey of a sample of 264 college students. Females were more likely to have a positive attitude towards self-help books. Other factors that predicted a positive attitude to self-help books were: enjoyment of reading in general, psychological mindedness (the disposition to think about psychological processes as related to the self and to relationships), a stronger self-control orientation and, last but not least, a greater life satisfaction. Self-help readers tend to have an ability to recognize relationships between thoughts, feelings and actions and want to use self-help books to improve themselves. Reading self-help book seems to be part of an active and adequate coping style, which fits in with an individualistic culture, where individuals have the freedom to pursue happiness on their own ground.

As for the Netherlands the profile of the readers of the Dutch monthly *Psychology Magazine* is known. We do not suspect that the readers of this magazine differ much from the people that buy self-help books in general. *Psychology Magazine* often has headlines with practical implications on the cover, such as how to be happy, how to succeed in relationships or how loneliness can be overcome.

Table 3 shows that the readers of *Psychology Magazine* are relatively well-to-do and highly educated. They work in a wide range of professions. Unfortunately we have no information about the mental health of readers. But we do know that they are very curious. The readers have indicated that they have a more than average interest in a wide range of subjects, ranging from developmental aid, literature, art history, medical science and vegetarian diets. Vegetarianism is even more interesting for the readers than psychology (Weekbladpers Tijdschriften, 2004, Unpublished paper). Such a lively interest in different subjects is more characteristic of happy than unhappy individuals (Veenhoven, 1988).

**Table 3** The readers of *Psychology Magazine*

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|                   |                     |      |
|-------------------|---------------------|------|
| <b>Gender</b>     | Female              | 73 % |
|                   | Male                | 23 % |
| <b>Age</b>        | 20–34               | 37%  |
|                   | 35–49               | 36%  |
|                   | 50–64               | 18%  |
|                   | ≥65                 | 5%   |
| <b>Income</b>     | Below average       | 23%  |
|                   | Average             | 8%   |
|                   | Above average       | 48%  |
| <b>Education:</b> | Higher education    | 49%  |
|                   | Secondary education | 45%  |
|                   | Primary education   | 6%   |

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Source: Weekbladpers Tijdschriften, 2004, Unpublished paper

### 3.6 *The effects of reading self-help books*

Do self-help books help? There are good reasons to doubt it. Yet there are also good reasons to expect that they often do. Below we review the arguments.

#### 3.6.1 Misgivings about self-help books

There is a lot of cynicism about the effectiveness of self-help books. It is not uncommon to bash self-help as a whole. Macdonald (1954) writes:

*'How to writers are to other writers as frogs are to mammals; their books are not born, they are spawned. A howtoer with only three or four books to his credit is looked upon as sterile.'*

Rosen (1977) used the title 'Psychobabble' in his volume on this topic. He writes: 'Psychobabble is... a set of repetitive verbal formalities that kills off the very spontaneity, candor, and understanding it pretends to promote. It's an idiom that reduces psychological insight to a collection of standardized observations, that provides a frozen lexicon to deal with an infinite variety of problems.' Styron (1990) calls self-help books fraudulent. Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 20) claims it is apparent

self-help books will not help most readers to be thin, powerful, rich and loved; and even if they succeed the readers will still be as unhappy as before they read the book.

Polivy and Herman (2002) claim that buying self-help volumes must be part of a false hope syndrome. Salerno (2005) holds self-help responsible for the end of romance, soaring divorce rates, the decline of the nuclear family, excessive political correctness and rising substance abuse, although this is by quite an inferential leap (Weiten, 2006).

### 3.6.2 Specific techniques recommended by self-help authors

Such a negative attitude is not justified by reference to any empirical studies. We were not able to find any studies that empirically investigated the effectiveness of the best-selling self-help books in the Netherlands. However, there are indications that self-help books sometimes offer outdated advice. Paul (2001) describes five common self-help myths:

- Vent your anger, and it will go away. Research shows that expressing anger can keep it alive.
- When you are down in the dumps, think yourself happy by focusing on the positive. Research shows that the result may be the opposite of what you want. It can make your misery of the moment even more apparent.
- Visualize your goals; it will help you to make them come true. Research shows that we not only need optimism about our ability to reach a given goal, but also a sharp focus on the obstacles that are in the way. You need to pay attention to the obstacles and the necessary steps to reach the goal.
- Self-affirmation will help you raise low self-esteem. Research shows that this technique is not powerful enough. We need positive feedback from people that matter to us. 'Self-esteem is the sum of your interactions with others over a lifetime, and it's not going to change overnight'.
- Active listening can help you communicate better with your partner. This is an appealing idea, but research shows that even happy, loving couples don't use the technique. It may be better to take your partner seriously, to avoid hostility and to avoid arousal.

Paul (2001) concludes: 'The five distortions presented here are only a few of the misconceptions you may encounter. To protect yourself against others, be sure to take the self-help descriptions with a measure of skepticism and a healthy dose of common sense.' The myths Paul (2001) describes confirm the mixed picture of the best-selling self-help books that emerged from the ratings by clinicians and make clear that self-help is not as good as it can or should be.

Another technical limitation is that self-help books work with a 'one-size fits all' approach. The advice is not be tailored to the personality of the reader, diagnosis or personal circumstances. Norem and Chang (2002) relate that this is a flaw that is also apparent in the positive psychology movement that is gaining momentum. They emphasize this point by a discussion of optimism. It is tempting to conclude that it is

wise to enhance optimism as much as possible, because there is substantial evidence that optimism in its many forms leads to better outcomes in coping, health, satisfaction and well-being (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). Still, the recommendation to look at the bright side is counterproductive for people who are very anxious. The induction of a positive mood deteriorates their performance and satisfaction. For them a strategy that is called defensive pessimism yields better results (Norem, 2001). Defensively pessimistic individuals set themselves unrealistic low targets and devote considerable time to all the possible outcomes they can imagine for a given situation. The result is twofold: on the one hand they no longer have to fear that they will mess up, because this is what could be expected; the other result is an increase in motivation. They know what might happen. The end result is a good performance, which would have been threatened by imposed optimism.

Another question is what aspect of optimism is lacking for a certain individual. Aspinwall, Richter and Hoffman (2001) illustrate this by the serenity prayer. Most psychologists studying optimism focus on changing the things one can change through active coping, and self-help authors are hard-liners in this respect. But Aspinwall, Richter and Hoffman offer data that indicate that the other parts of the prayer are equally important: it is productive to accept the things one cannot change and to have the wisdom to distinguish things one can and cannot change. Self-help may have detrimental effects if it focuses on the wrong aspects of optimism for a certain reader.

‘The challenge for positive psychology as it works to better the human condition is to remember that there is no one human condition’ (Norem & Chang, 2002). The same is true for self-help. Solid, empirically valid self-help advice about learned optimism (Seligman, 1991), that is strongly recommended by clinicians (Norcross et al., 2000), may have negative consequences for some of the more anxious readers.

### 3.6.3 Observed effects of reading problem-focused books

There is empirical evidence that reading problem-focused self-help materials can be effective in the treatment of disorders, and even have outcomes comparable to therapist administered treatments (Wilson & Cash, 2000; Den Boer, Wiersma, & Van Den Bosch, 2004). For example Cuijpers (1997) has made a meta-analysis of six studies in which the effectiveness of bibliotherapy was compared with other treatment modes for unipolar depression. The author’s conclusion is described and updated in the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness; ‘Bibliotherapy is an effective treatment modality, which is no less effective than individual or group therapy.’ The treatment effect was measured with the help of depression inventories. A more elaborate review yields the same conclusion (Cuijpers, Kramer, & Willemse, submitted). Self-help books can also prevent part of the incidence of depression in high risk groups (Willemse, Smit, Cuijpers, & Tiemens, 2004).

Cuijpers (1997) conclusion about the effectiveness of the self-help books is based on a limited number of studies and the participants were not drawn from a clinical population, but were recruited through announcements in the media. The depressions were mild more often than severe. Other reviews on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy

also suggest that reading instructions can have significant positive consequences, better than control treatment while on a waiting list (Den Boer, Wiersma & Van Den Bosch, 2004; Gould & Clum, 1993; Mains & Scogin, 2003; Marrs, 1995; Scogin, Bynum, Stephens & Calhoon, 1990; Williams, 2001).

However, it is clear that self-help is not equally effective for each disorder and every person. According to Mains and Scogin (2003), self-help treatments were successful for anxiety, depression and mild alcohol abuse, but less so for smoking cessation and moderate and severe alcohol abuse. Gould and Clum (1993) and Marrs (1995) add successes for headaches, insomnia and sexual dysfunction, and confirm the lack of success for smoking cessation and alcohol addiction. Self-help has greatest success with people with high motivation, resourcefulness and positive attitudes toward self-help treatments.

There are also several studies that failed to find positive effects from self-administered treatment programs, even if the technique prescribed has been shown to be successful in a psychotherapeutic context (Rosen, 1987; Rosen, Glasgow, & Moore, 2003). The fact that empirical data about the efficacy of most self-help books is lacking, must be taken seriously given the cautionary tale by Rosen (1987). He probably has the honor to have reached the largest experimental effect ever in psychotherapy literature, but sadly in the wrong direction. He studied a self-help desensitization program for people with a snake phobia. The program worked fine for people that complied to it, but only 50% did. So the researchers added a self-reward strategy to their program to enhance compliance, but discovered that compliance dropped to zero, an unexpected failure from well-intending experts with state-of-the-art knowledge.

Another cautionary remark is that the power of a book to lead to meaningful changes in thinking, feeling and behavior, can also have negative consequences. A famous example is Goethe's book *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) that is said to have inspired some readers to commit suicide. Failure to benefit from a self-help book may lead to self-blame and/or the worsening of symptoms (Rosen, 1987). An as yet unpublished study indicated that people that read a self-help book about depression with minimal help from a psychotherapist, wrongly concluded that they could not be helped at all if they did not profit from the advice offered (De Regt, personal communication); but empirical research suggests that these negative consequences are rather rare (Scogin, et al., 1996).

#### 3.6.4 Indications for effectiveness of reading growth-oriented books

The effectiveness of growth-oriented self-help books has not yet been investigated in this way. There are, however, some indications of their effectiveness. One indication is the judgement of these books by professionals and another is the readers' evaluations. Still another indication for effectiveness is the relevance of the topics addressed. Below we will check that relevance in a comparison of topics in the books and the conditions for happiness observed in empirical research.

#### 3.6.4.1 Clinicians' ratings of self-help books

The *Authoritative guide to self-help resources in mental health* (Norcross et al., 2000) has brought together the reviews and ratings of more than a thousand American clinicians about 600 self-help books for different categories like schizophrenia, mood disorders, anxiety, stress-management and headaches. The problem-focused books are dominant in the selection made by Norcross, but some of the categories such as Career development, Self-management and self-enhancement and Spiritual and Existential concerns are clearly growth oriented.

The selection of self-help books was not random, but it is encouraging that the reviews are predominantly positive. Nineteen percent of the books are considered very helpful and one percent is rated negative. Another indication for the quality of self-help books is the fact that a large number of psychotherapists (85%) recommend self-help books to clients (Campbell & Smith, 2003; Norcross et al., 2000; Starker, 1988).

Thirteen books out of the top 57 bestselling Dutch psychology books were rated in Norcross et al. (Table 4). The ratings are rather mixed. The main reason for this is that the books by Wayne Dyer and John Gray are often sold to the Dutch public, although clinicians do not recommend them.

**Table 4** Clinicians ratings in Norcross et al. (2000) of Dutch popular psychology books

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#### **Strongly recommended**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Albom:                 | Tuesdays with Morrie <sup>a</sup> (Dinsdagen met Morrie) |
| Csikszentmihalyi:      | Finding Flow (De weg naar flow)                          |
| Vanzant <sup>b</sup> : | In the meantime (In de tussentijd)                       |

#### **Recommended**

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Csikszentmihalyi: | Flow (Flow)  |
| Goleman:          | Emotional intelligence (Emotionele intelligentie)  |
| Norwood:          | Women who love too much (Als hij maar gelukkig is) |
| Robbins:          | Unlimited power (Je ongekende vermogens)           |

#### **Not recommended:**

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Carnegie: | How to win friends and influence people (Zo maakt u vrienden en goede relaties)    |
| Dyer:     | Pulling your own strings (Beziel je leven)   |
| Dyer:     | Your erroneous zones (Niet morgen maar nu)   |
| Gray:     | Men are from Mars, women are from Venus (Mannen komen van Mars, vrouwen van Venus) |
| Gray:     | Mars and Venus starting over (Mars en Venus beginnen weer)                         |

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## Strongly not recommended:

Gray: Mars and Venus in the bedroom (Liefdesgeheimen van Mars en Venus)

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<sup>a</sup> The original English titles are given with the Dutch title between parentheses

<sup>b</sup> The book by Vazant was not rated by enough clinicians to be strongly recommended by Norcross et al., but eight clinicians appreciated the book very much. The book was therefore categorized as a ‘diamond in the rough’

### 3.6.4.2 Readers’ evaluations of self-help books

Starker (1989) conducted a survey on self-help of 67 volunteer hospital workers, men and woman ranging in age from 27 to 86 years of age. Starker did not make a distinction between problem focused and growth oriented self-help books for his survey. The large majority (85%) thought the books were ‘sometimes helpful’ or ‘often helpful’. This sample reported positive experiences such as:

- ‘Opened new avenues for me’.
- ‘More self-confidence’.
- ‘Made me understand myself and others’.
- ‘Insight into problem areas’.
- ‘Peace of mind’.
- ‘Knowledge of hypertension and stress’.

### 3.6.4.3 Relevance of the advice

Self-help books are unlikely to be effective if the topics they address have little relevance for the happiness of most people. This can be checked by comparing the topics in growth-oriented books with findings of empirical research on happiness. If a self-help author recommends to seek happiness in a higher income, that advice is unlikely to work out well for most readers, since research has found little relation between happiness and income (e.g., Kasser, 2002; Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001; Tatzel, 2003). If, however, the advice is to optimize personal relationships, an effective book has a good chance to enhance happiness, because good relationships appear to be an important condition for happiness.

This line of reasoning offers the possibility to check the topic choices in the self-help literature. Because of the abundance of the studies involved I will not use individual studies, but refer again to the findings in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2006). This is a large database where most correlational findings about happiness are gathered. Table 5 summarizes the topic choices in the self-help literature and makes a comparison with the correlational data in the database.

**Table 5** Topics in the self-help literature and their relevance for happiness

| <b>Topic</b>              | <b>Recommendation in self-help books as observed in content-analysis by the author</b> | <b>Correlates of happiness as observed in empirical research</b> |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Activity level            | +  | +  |
| Aggression                | --   | -  |
| Appearance                | -  | ±  |
| Calmness                  | ++   | +  |
| Creativity                | +  | +  |
| Dominance                 | ±  | +  |
| Family                    | +  | ++   |
| Freedom                   | +  | +  |
| Friendship                | +  | +  |
| Independence              | ++   | ±  |
| Internal locus of control | ++   | +  |
| Intimacy                  | ++   | ++   |
| Love-life and marriage    | ++   | ++   |
| Mental health             | ++   | ++   |
| Popularity                | +  | ++   |
| Possessions wealth        | ±  | +  |
| Religion                  | ±  | +  |
| Self-actualisation        | ++   | +  |
| Tolerance                 | ++   | +  |
| Usefulness for others     | +  | +  |

++ Very positive  $r > +0.4$

+ Positive  $r > +0.2$

± Ambivalent  $r > \pm 0.2$

- Negative  $r > -0.4$

-- Very negative  $r < -0.4$

Table 5 confirms the impression that self-help books recommend for things that are related to happiness. The differences between the recommendations in self-help-books and the observed correlates of happiness do not seem to be random.

The self-help books stress a specific way of life that is built on the ideas of the individual pursuit of happiness and humanistic psychology. In self-help books the focus is more on eudemonic well-being than on hedonistic well-being. These concepts offer different definitions of the good life. Hedonistic well-being concentrates on pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, on feeling good, but not necessary on outward

success. Eudemonic well-being defines well-being in terms of the degree to which people are fully functioning (Ryan, 2001) and adds a moral dimension to the good life.

The authors want to foster personal growth and overrate personal independence, tolerance, self-actualization, calmness and an internal locus of control. Aggression, popularity and appearance seem to be undervalued. So self-help books could help to enhance happiness. However, this content-analysis cannot give an indication whether these self-help books actually fulfil their promise.

### *3.7 Similarities and differences with psychotherapy*

A comparison with psychotherapy research can help to get a more complete view on the possible effects of reading self-help books. A useful distinction in psychotherapy research is the difference between *specific* and *non-specific* effects. This distinction was made because of the unexpected fact that very different schools of psychotherapy (psychodynamic, humanistic or behavioral) tend to yield the same treatment outcomes. Luborsky, Singer and Luborsky (1975) suggested to use the verdict of the Dodo bird in Alice in Wonderland: 'Everyone has won and all must have prizes.'

This effect can be explained by common factors in psychotherapy, like the personal resources and life circumstances of the client (which explain 40% of outcome variance), the emotionally charged relationship with the therapist (30%) and placebo, hope and expectancy (15%). The specific techniques and models of the treatment may explain 15% of treatment variance (Hubble & Miller, 2004). Below, self-help is discussed with the help of the three common factors, that are most relevant for treatment outcome.

#### *3.7.1 Hope, placebo and expectancy*

An important common factor that is shared by virtually all self-help books is the message that you can improve your lot. They offer a strong antidote against learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), but perhaps for readers that do not suffer from it. Starker (1989) is an outspoken defender of this common factor. He writes:

Of what value is an inspirational message to those in need of health, beauty, happiness, success, and creativity? In general, it lifts the spirit, engenders and supports hope, and keeps people striving towards their goals; it also fends off feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, despair and depression. This constitutes its greatest service. When a particular self-help book loses its value in this regard, when it is 'used up' as a source of inspiration and motivation, it is generally discarded and replaced. Readers become bored or disillusioned with particular self-help works and technologies, but seem to be quite forgiving of the genre. Perhaps the next book will provide the answers, the comfort, the cure, the secrets being sought.

Starker goes on to compare the effect of self-help books with a placebo effect for drugs. He quotes Linnie Price:

‘If the pharmaceutical industry were to produce a drug which was as reliable, of such wide-ranging applicability, and with a record of efficacy as impressive as that of the placebo effect, it would no doubt be proclaimed a miracle panacea.’

The belief that one can improve is a powerful factor in actual improvement, and cannot easily be dismissed. Ogles, Lambert & Craig (1991) found that reading a self-help book about coping with loss or divorce resulted in higher symptomatic relief for readers with higher initial expectations of benefit.

This inspirational message comes with a risk. Active coping can lead to frustration if it is impossible to control a stressor. It may inspire persons to blame themselves for things that occur to them outside their responsibility. Sometimes acceptance may be a better way out than active coping, and sometimes cultural change may be necessary instead of individual change.

Rosen (1987) points to the fact that the inspirational message can lead to unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims. He takes a book by the noted psychologist Arnold Lazarus as an example. On the jacket of his book *In the Mind's Eye*, it is claimed that the book will help to ‘enhance your creative powers; stop smoking, drinking or overeating; overcome sadness and despondence; build self-confidence and skill; overcome fears and anxiety’. This is quite a claim for an untested book and not in line with the APA ethical standards: ‘Psychologists do not make (...) deceptive (...) statements concerning (...) the degree of success of, their services.’ (www.apa.org/ethics) Other books exaggerate even more, as is the case with the book title of Diekstra: ‘I can think and feel what I want.’ This is unethical by APA standards; and the risk of exaggerated claims is that they foster disappointment.

Another danger of overly optimistic messages is that readers will take a lighthearted attitude to meaningful changes. In psychotherapy it is commonly recognized that effort is necessary for improvement and/or relapse prevention. The self-help message that the wisdom of an author guarantees heaven on earth may inspire daydreaming, but not hard work and perseverance (Ellis, 1993). For example, it has been shown that women who fantasized about size 36 that they would reach with the latest diet, actually gained weight, if they didn’t pay proper attention to all the obstacles on the way and didn’t realize how much willpower they would need in order to stick to the diet (Oettingen, 1996).

### 3.7.2 The role of a professional

The relationship between the client and the therapist is an important factor in explaining the successes of therapy (Wampold, 2001), and this element is obviously missing in self-help. The role of the psychotherapist is mentioned here explicitly, to highlight the fact that self-help lacks the involvement of a professional. In psychotherapy it is not only the client that chooses the therapist, but also the therapist that chooses a client and selects a treatment. This selection process can make the difference between treatment success and failure, but in self-help it is the reader who has to make a choice on his or her own.

It is important to notice that self-help readers are not provided with a structure to overcome this limitation. Academic psychology usually neglects the genre and leaves it to the public to make choices. Publishers and authors have a stake in selling many books and try to persuade as many readers as possible to buy the book. We have never seen a self-help book with contra-indications on the cover or a warning about possible side effects.

Starker (1989) thinks that the enormous variety of self-help books and the haphazard way in which they are selected represents the 'greatest single problem' with the genre. A well-advertised book that is endorsed by a celebrity will find a larger audience than a better book from a small publishing house. The danger that the mismatch between a reader and the technology offered in a self-help book has negative consequences is probably greater if the book is highly prescriptive and if the author presents a closed philosophy that discourages the reader to look for corrective information.

### 3.7.3 The role of the reader

The discussions about the lack of involvement of a therapist and the interaction between the advice offered and the personality of the reader, make it clear that in self-help the client bears a lot of responsibility in choosing a suitable self-help book and after this choice has been made, in sorting out the options that are presented by the self-help author.

The interaction between the advice offered and the personality or circumstances of the reader can in principle be studied and data about this can be used for the advantage of the reader. But the interaction between reader and book goes much further than that and will also have more unpredictable aspects. No self-help guide can offer a real recipe for the good life. A book can only point to possible directions. The reader will decide which leads he or she will follow and which can be ignored. Another possibility is that the reader will misunderstand the author. The advice will also be applied in situations for which it was never intended. Therefore it is likely that in some cases good advice can lead to bad outcomes and bad advice may work out fine.

A self-help book requires a very active role on the part of the reader, but maybe this is not that different from the situation in psychotherapy. Hubble and Miller (2004) describe clients as full and complete partners in their care. They suggest that psychotherapists should adopt the frame of reference of clients themselves to make meaningful changes and should above all help clients to discover their own strengths and use them more often.

In self-help the role of the reader is even more important. Maybe the self-help books function in a way that is similar to travel guides. Most readers will not follow the book page by page, but will study parts of the book and will select some travel options they would have never heard of without the book. In a similar way self-help books seem to enhance the freedom of choice in an individualistic society. The books show options for thinking and acting from the psychological toolkit of the individual that are underdeveloped or could be used more often. Perhaps we may trust the readers to use

the advice as long as it helps for them. This optimism is greatly enhanced by the fact that individuals flourish more in individualistic and free societies (see for reviews Veenhoven, 1998, 1999). Most individuals are apparently able to choose options in life that work for them.

If this interpretation is correct, we can speculate that the quality of the advice offered in self-help books may be less important than the quality of the reader. It is the reader that decides to drop the options that do not enhance satisfaction and keep on track if some advice seems to work out fine. If a self-help therapy works we should first congratulate the 'client' not the 'therapist'.

### *3.8 Conclusion*

There is some evidence that reading problem-focused self-help books tends to be helpful for people with specific problems. As yet there is no hard evidence for the effectiveness of reading growth-oriented books. This is a regrettable omission on the part of academic psychology.

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## Appendix A

### Dutch titles of best-selling psychology books

- Albom, Dinsdagen met Morrie.
- Baanders, Ik ben niet verdrietig, ik ben boos.
- Bakker, Vitaliteit.
- Ball, Droomencyclopedie.
- Beggs, Kleine boek van de inspiratie.
- Benninga, Haal het beste uit jezelf.
- Bergen, Lessen van burn-out.
- Bloemers, Psychologisch onderzoek.
- Bolen, Goden in elke man.
- Bolen, Godinnen in elke vrouw.
- Can, Leren omgaan met je depressie pakket.
- Carlson, Don't worry, make money.
- Carlson, Maak van een mug geen olifant op het werk.
- Carnegie, Zo maakt u vrienden en goede relaties.
- Cleese, Hoe overleef ik mijn familie.
- Csikszentmihalyi, De weg naar flow.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Flow.
- Delfos, Luister je wel naar mij?
- Diekstra, Ik kan denken voelen wat ik wil.
- Diekstra, O Nederland Vernederland.
- Dyer, Beziel je leven.
- Dyer, Geen zee te hoog.
- Dyer, Geschenken van Eykis.
- Dyer, Niet morgen, maar nu.
- Elias, Emotionele intelligentie voor ouders.
- Fever, Pak van mijn hart.
- Forward, Emotionele chantage.
- Goleman, Emotionele intelligentie.
- Gottman, Zeven pijlers van een goede relatie.
- Gray, Krijgen wat je wilt en willen wat je hebt.
- Gray, Liefdesgeheimen van Mars en Venus.
- Gray, Mannen komen van Mars, vrouwen van Venus.
- Gray, Mars en Venus beginnen opnieuw.
- Gray, Mars en Venus krijgen een kind.
- IJzermans, Beren op de weg, spinsels in je hoofd.
- Karsten, Omgaan met burn-out.
- Knoope, De creatiespiraal.
- Lang, Psychologische gespreksvoering.
- Lundberg, Problemen laten bij wie ze horen.

- MacGraw, Leer te leven.
- Millman, Keerpunt in je leven.
- Millman, Leven waarvoor je geboren bent.
- Norwood, Als hij maar gelukkig is.
- Pease, Waarom mannen niet luisteren.
- Powell, Zelfhypnose voor iedereen.
- Rigter, Palet van de psychologie.
- Robbins, Je ongekende vermogens.
- Sterk, Denk je sterk, denk je zeker.
- Sterk, Ruimte voor jezelf.
- Vanzant, In de tussentijd; Vind jezelf en de liefde die je nastreeft.
- Wijnberg, Als je zegt wat je denkt.
- Wilson, Grote boek van de rust.
- Wilson, Kleine boek van de rust.
- Wilson, Kleine boek van de slaap.
- Wilson, Kleine boek van het geluk.
- Young, Leven in je leven.
- Zohar, Spirituele intelligentie.



## Happiness in the garden of Epicurus

### Summary

*Epicurus was a philosopher who lived in Greece in the 3rd century B.C. Like his contemporaries, he was much concerned with the question of how to live a good life. In his view the Chief Good is to decrease pain and increase pleasure. Though Epicurus is reputed for advocating the pursuit of refined sensorial pleasures, he recognized the need for deferring gratification or enduring pain. He advised his followers to lead a modest and contemplative life in friendly communities. His advice can be characterized as 'serene hedonism'. This paper explains that position and considers its applicability for the present day. It concludes that Epicureanism was quite accurate in describing the conditions of happiness and that he offered valuable guidelines in dealing with hardship and difficult emotional content. His ideas that happiness is the same as the absence of pain and that one should withdraw from society are less fortunate. It made him assume that happiness automatically follows if one is in the right state of mind, and that there is no need to actively seek interaction with the environment for the betterment of the circumstances of life. However, Epicurus' advice might have been a good option for his contemporaries given the societal turmoil in his times.*

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## *4.1 Introduction*

More than 2000 years ago, in the Greek world, many philosophers occupied themselves with the question, What makes our lives happy? Most of these antique philosophies, like the systems of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoa, not only produced theory on this subject, but also promised happiness to those who were willing to accept their viewpoints (Algra, 1998a, pp. 18–19.) Among these great philosophical systems Epicurus' philosophy stands out because it is a view that identifies happiness with pleasure and is the one among the ancient versions of hedonism that is best known and to which attention is still paid.

Epicurus' philosophy, formulated in the third century B.C., gave its followers the prospect of personal happiness and took almost religious proportions; the adherents lived in small communities and the founder of this school was worshipped as a deity. His life was considered exemplary. There are some indications that Epicurus was successful in living his own philosophy, and he gave clear, understandable advice on how to achieve personal happiness. Moreover, he claimed to have founded his philosophy on empirical facts. His philosophy about the good life brought Epicurus fame that has lasted till the present day. Epicureanism is a name for a specific lifestyle that seeks refined sensual pleasure, although this stance does not follow logically from the philosophy. Epicurus warned explicitly against the pursuit of luxury. Indulgence would increase desires and make a person dependent on the whims of fortune.

Epicurus' thoughts about happiness are often reviewed from a philosophical standpoint (see for a good example Annas, 1993), but in this paper we ask the more practical question whether his advice for leading a happy life still deserves to be followed. To that end we will first present a description of Epicurus' life and his recommendations. Next we will compare his advice with the present day conditions for happiness as observed in modern empirical research. Note that we do not seek philosophical exegesis of Epicurus' ideas.

## *4.2 Epicurus*

### *4.2.1 His time*

Epicurus formulated his happiness advice during the Hellenistic period in Greek history that runs from 323 B.C., the year of the death of Alexander the Great until the establishment of the Roman Empire in 31 B.C. (Tarn, 1952). In this era many new philosophies were formulated and gained popularity; it seems that the philosophies in vogue at the end of the fourth century B.C., the schools of Plato and Aristotle, could no longer provide reasonable answers for life in the changing times that resulted from the politics and conquests of Alexander the Great. The new so-called Hellenistic philosophies, Stoicism, Skepticism and Epicureanism, are sometimes called the products of the new world Alexander the Great had made, and can be regarded as attempts to come to terms with the changing social and political circumstances (Long, 1986; Tarn, 1952). The Greeks came into contact with new philosophies, religions and

cultures, and transplanted the social institutions of the Greek mainland to Asia and Egypt (Long, 1986).

The sheer size of the Greek empire caused the importance of the city-state to decline. People were travelling around; citizenship was no longer bound to one city; and the city-state was no longer the way to organize society. The Greeks started to think about people as individuals living in a cosmopolitan universe of which Greece formed only a part (Jones, 1989). The old loyalty to the Greek race, the city-state, and its Olympic Gods didn't seem that important anymore. Commitment to civic and political activity could no longer compete with the more immediate claims of private life (Jones, 1989; Russell, 1990). The Greek citizens became alienated from the affairs of their own city.

The changes were accompanied by a general feeling of insignificance and insecurity. The world had become unpredictable and bewildering for many Greeks. The years after Alexander's death were characterized by political instability, wars and dynastic struggles (Russell, 1990; Tarn, 1952). This situation added to the impulse to turn away from the outer world and seek security and identity in the sphere of private relationships (Jones, 1989). The Hellenistic philosophies took various positions in an effort to deal with these changing times. Stoicism addressed the more highly educated and aristocratic citizens with its focus on public life. Epicurus' philosophy appealed mostly to the fearful and oppressed citizens, the ones that didn't want the new world (Tarn, 1952). It promised a way out of the turmoil into a more quiet and safe life.

#### 4.2.2 Personal history

Epicurus was born on the island of Samos in 341 B.C. as the son of Neocles and Chairestrate. Because he was born in a colony of Athens he was an Athenian citizen and at the age of 18 he went to Athens to fulfil his military obligations. In 321 he joined his parents in Colophon on the west coast of Asia Minor. Then he stayed a while in Mytilene on Lesbos and in Lampsacus. The details of Epicurus' life in the period 320–310 are not well known, nor is it entirely clear where and by whom Epicurus was educated. He claimed to be self-taught, although tradition has it that he was schooled in the systems of Plato and Democritus (Laertius, 1994, pp. 3–4).

Between 307 and 305 Epicurus settled again in Athens. He purchased a house and a large walled Garden where he taught and where he and a group of followers formed a close community. His school became known by the name of the Garden—*Kêpos*. In antiquity the Garden was famous for its closed character, the enormous loyalty to Epicurus and the close friendships between the members. Epicurus stayed in Athens until he died in 271 at the age of 72. Although his writings were voluminous, there are only fragments left (Algra, 1998b, pp. 9–11).

After his death, Epicureanism continued to flourish as a philosophical movement. Communities of Epicureans sprang up throughout the Hellenistic world, a cult rose around the person Epicurus and celebrations were held in his memory. Epicureanism went into decline with the rise of Christianity and it was not until the Renaissance that serious interest in Epicureanism was revived.

#### 4.2.3 Philosophy

Epicurus followed the popular division of philosophy into three parts: physics, logic and ethics. He confined logic to epistemology—*kanônika*—which enables us to distinguish true from false propositions. The primary criterion of truth comes from the senses; we can gain knowledge through the senses and we can trust the senses when properly used (Epicurus, 1994, p. 38). Feelings—*pâthe*—also provide criteria for the truth; they serve as criteria for values. Epicurus also identifies *prolepsis* as a criterion. The *prolepsis* of a thing is an instinctively acquired generic grasp of its nature and includes those of god, human beings and body.

Epicurus' physics is based on his epistemology: on the indisputable evidence from the sense-experiences and the natural generic conceptions. His physics is materialistic and mechanistic (Algra, 1998a, p. 26). He appropriated much of the mechanics of his predecessor, the atomist Democritus, but introduced an element of spontaneity. Epicurus believed that the basic constituents of the world were atoms moving in the void and that ordinary objects are conglomerations of these atoms. The properties of macroscopic bodies and all the events we see occurring can be explained in terms of the coalitions, rebounding, and entanglements of atoms (Epicurus, 1994, pp. 42–44).

Epicurus' thoughts about ethics are based on his view of physics and logic. In the domain of ethics we should trust our feelings of pleasure and pain. Pleasure—*hêdonê*—is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable and should be regarded as the main criterion for all actions. It is given by human nature that all our actions aim at pleasure and try to avoid displeasure. Epicurus argues that the behaviour of the newborn confirms this theory (Epicurus, 1994, p. 128). Epicurus outlines the view that pleasure and pain are jointly exhaustive: the absence of pain is itself pleasure. This implies that there is no intermediate state: For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain and when we are not in pain then we no longer need pleasure. And this is why we say that pleasure is the starting point and goal of living happily. For we recognized this as our first innate good, and this is our starting point for every choice and avoidance and we come to this by judging every good by the criterion of feeling (Epicurus, 1994, pp. 128–129).

The freedom from pain, which is, as we have seen, in itself a pleasant state, consists in the lack of pain in the body—*aponia*—and the non-disturbance of the soul, a state Epicurus called the tranquillity of the mind—*ataraxia*—(Epicurus, 1994, p. 131). This state is also called static pleasure, because it is thought to arise from the stable atomic structure of our souls. The kinetic pleasures are thought to be less important, because they rely on the actual motion of the atoms and are temporary. This idea made Epicurus emphasize 'untroubledness' over the less important positive pleasures, although this static state could be achieved or varied by short-term—kinetic—pleasures of stimulation. The kinetic pleasures have a bodily and a mental version. Mental pleasures can also consist in reliving past kinetic pleasures or anticipating future ones and can outweigh present pains.

Epicurus insists that one should trust one's feelings. This, however, does not imply that the accumulation of new instant pleasures increases happiness beyond what is



achieved when all pain has gone (Epicurus, 1994, p. xviii). Thus the pursuit of luxury does not increase pleasure. What it can do is enlarge your desires, make you run the risk of becoming dependent on them and thus make you vulnerable to the whims of fortune. This implies that one sometimes has to pass up some pleasures in order to get a greater pleasure, and that many pains are better than some pleasures if a greater pleasure follows by enduring those pains (Epicurus, 1994, p. 129). To maximize pleasure one therefore has to calculate the relative roles of bodily and mental, static and kinetic pleasures. Epicurus was an ‘unimpeachable ascetic who taught that “genuine pleasure” was not “the pleasure of profligates,” but rather the simple satisfaction of a mind and body at peace’ (McMahon, 2004, p. 11).

### *4.3 Epicurus’ advice*

Epicurus does not see the above-mentioned three parts of philosophy—logic, physics and ethics—as equally important. He subordinates logic to physics and physics to ethics. The purpose of knowledge is pragmatic and solely meant to free you from fears and mental uncertainty. Epicurus’ philosophy aims at making life happy and promises happiness to anyone who embraces his viewpoint.

Let no one delay the study of philosophy while young nor become weary of it when old. For no one is either too young or too old for the health of the soul. He who says either that the time for philosophy had not yet come or that it has passed is like someone who says that the time for happiness has not yet come or that it has passed. Therefore both young and old must philosophise, the latter so that although old he may stay young in good things owing to gratitude for what has occurred, the former so that although young he too may be like an old man owing to his lack of fear or what is to come. Therefore, one must practise the things which produce happiness, since if that is present we have everything and if it is absent we do everything in order to obtain it. (Epicurus, 1994, p. 122).

#### *4.3.1 Four basic truths*

Epicurus’ happiness philosophy is hedonistic in the sense that he equates the old Greek concept of happiness—*eudaimonia*—with pleasure—*hêdônê*. Pleasure is the starting-point and the goal of living happily (Epicurus, 1994, p. 128). Life is pleasurable when the mind is free from fears and the body is content with natural satisfactions. You can achieve this state of happiness if you accept the four basic truths of Epicureanism, the so-called ‘four-part cure’ (Philodemus of Gardara, cited in Epicurus (1994, p. vii)):

1. Don’t fear the gods
2. Don’t worry about death
3. What is good is easy to get
4. What is terrible is easy to endure

#### 4.3.1.1 Don't fear the gods

Epicurus claims that the gods exist because we have clear knowledge of them.<sup>5</sup> They are happy and immortal, indestructible and blessed animals (Epicurus, 1994, p. 123). The gods are in a state of bliss, and are only occupied with the continuance of their own happiness. They do not have any needs, are invulnerable to any harm and do not concern themselves with the human world. The gods therefore have no influence over our lives and this is why we don't have to fear them.

This leaves Epicurus and us with the question how there can be any order if the gods are unconcerned about human affairs. The physical reality lacks immanent order. It is up to us to find the limitations that human nature imposes on us and to create our own order. We have to make arrangements to manage the external threats as well as possible (Hutchinson, 1994, p. x). This means that there is no need to ask favours from the gods, because we humans are fully able to supply things for ourselves (Epicurus, 1994).

#### 4.3.1.2 Don't worry about death

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us since 'all good and bad consists in sense-experience and death is the privation of sense-experience' (Epicurus, 1994, p. 124). When you die, your soul ceases to exist, because it is composed of very fine and smooth atoms that are dispersed if the body no longer holds them together, says Epicurus in his Letter to Herodotus (Epicurus, 1994, p. 65). Therefore, when you are dead you cannot deal with death and when you are alive you don't have to worry about death either since death is not yet present. There is no life after death, as Epicurus puts it: '...it [death] is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist' (Epicurus, 1994, p. 125). Epicurus chooses a rational solution to eliminate our fear of death, which is in his eyes a great source of unhappiness.

#### 4.3.1.3 What is good is easy to get

As we have seen above, Epicurus states that what is pleasurable is easy to get; it is not difficult to achieve the state of absence of pain. Epicurus seems to have been occupied by the fact that a lot of people are unhappy, despite the fact that their means of living could be sufficient for a pleasurable life. The goal of his philosophy is to carefully manage pleasures, for it is the specific way in which people try to fulfill their needs where they can go wrong (Annas, 1993, p. 199). According to Epicurus, our desires fall into three categories: '...some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as the result of groundless opinion' (Epicurus, 1994, p. xxix).

Natural and necessary desires will liberate us from pain when they are fulfilled. We cannot be happy, healthy or even alive without these desires being fulfilled. Epicurus

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<sup>5</sup> In Epicurus' view there is a natural conception (prolepsis) of god, a conception that is shared by all human beings.

mentions food, water, shelter from the elements and safety from the animals and people. According to Epicurus it is easy to provide for the fulfillment of these basic needs yourself.

The natural desires that do not cause pain when they remain unfulfilled are not necessary. An example is delicious and expensive food. This is pleasurable, but does not remove pain better than ordinary food. Therefore it is natural but not necessary. The natural and necessary desires are generic; it is the desire for food, for drink and so on. The unnecessary and natural desires are the preferences for specific kinds of food, such as lobster. You need to fulfill natural and necessary desires, but you can only want specific unnecessary and natural desires, and it is better not to become dependent on the latter, for that would increase the risk of unhappiness (Annas, 1993, p. 193). Epicurus stresses that we will be happy if we stick to the natural and necessary desires, 'not in order that we might make do with few things under all circumstances, but so that if we do not have a lot we can make do with few, being genuinely convinced that those who least need extravagance enjoy it most' (Epicurus, 1994, p. 130).

Unnatural and unnecessary desires are, for example, the thirst for honours and the desire for crowns and statues. These desires limit the self-sufficiency of people and increase the risk of unhappiness. It is better not to pursue these desires since they will cause uncontrollable desires and moreover, the pleasures that come from the fulfillment of unnecessary or unnatural desires, can give rise to troubles many times greater than the pleasures. Becoming accustomed to simple ways of life makes us completely healthy, makes us unhesitant in the face of life's necessary duties, puts us in better condition for the times of extravagance which sometimes come along and make us fearless in the face of chance (Epicurus, 1994, p. 131).

#### 4.3.1.4 What is terrible is easy to endure

Good is what gives us pleasure; bad is what causes us pain. According to Epicurus these pains are always easy to ignore, since heavy pains don't last very long and chronic pains cause only mild distress (Epicurus, 1994, p. 4). This implies that under all circumstances we can try to push back pains and other discomforts by focusing on the opposite feelings of pleasure. Bodily discomfort can be outweighed by the mental pleasure of reliving past kinetic pleasures and anticipating future ones.

#### 4.3.1.5 More advice

The good, happy and pleasurable life Epicurus promises us when we will follow his advice cannot be achieved without the study of philosophy. He also identifies some virtues that contribute to our happiness, among which prudence is the most important. He indicates friendship and justice as two important features that provide us security which he identifies as a natural good (Epicurus, 1994, p. vii).

##### 4.3.1.5.1 Philosophy

Philosophy should not be pursued as knowledge for its own sake, but to bring about peace of mind and body. Philosophy helps us to eliminate the two main sources of fear

that affects our feelings of happiness negatively, our fear of death and our fear of the gods. Besides that, Epicurus finds, as probably most philosophers do, the activity of philosophy itself pleasurable as he puts it: ‘...in philosophy the pleasure accompanies the knowledge. For the enjoyment does not come after the learning but the learning and the enjoyment are simultaneous’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 27).

#### 4.3.1.5.2 Prudence

Epicurus’ ethics is hedonistic. As Epicurus puts it: ‘One must honour the noble, and the virtues and things like that, if they produce pleasure. But if they do not, one must bid them goodbye’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 132). Virtues that do not lead to pleasure only provide empty, pointless and disturbing expectations of rewards. But, as he puts it in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, most virtues are natural adjuncts of the pleasant life and the pleasant life is inseparable from them. Since we have to search out the reasons of every choice and to get rid of the opinions that are the sources of the greatest turmoil in men’s souls, we also have to be prudent beings (Epicurus, 1994, p. 132). Therefore, Epicurus finds prudence the most important of all virtues; without this virtue we will not be able to decide what contributes most to our pleasure. He also considers prudence the source of all other virtues, ‘teaching that it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably, and justly and impossible to live prudently, honourably, and justly without living pleasantly’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 132).

We need prudence to be able to make deliberated decisions about which pleasures to choose or to avoid, and it is also the best weapon to fight fate, chance and misfortune (Epicurus, 1994, pp. 129–130). The wise man knows that nothing, good or bad with respect to living blessedly is given by chance to men. The prudent man therefore recognizes that ‘misfortunes must be cured by a sense of gratitude for what has been and the knowledge that what is past cannot be undone’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 134). It also leads Epicurus to say that ‘one should envy no-one. For the good are not worthy of envy, and the more good fortune the wicked have, the more they spoil it for themselves’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 53).

#### 4.3.1.5.3 Security

In order to live an undisturbed life, Epicurus believes that we have to be safe from our neighbours. This security is most easily provided through friendship, but also by making laws or social contracts ‘about neither harming one another nor be harmed’, and by withdrawal from the people since ‘the purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. xxxi).

The laws exist for the sake of the wise—the ones who follow Epicurus’ teachings—not because they would commit injustice, but because they will not suffer injustice (Clement of Alexandria and Stobaeus, cited in Epicurus, p. 103, 104). Epicurus views justice in a hedonistic way: it should aim at our own pleasure. His argument for obeying the law has the same signature; breaking the law will cause disturbance since we will live with the fear of being discovered by our neighbours (Epicurus, 1994, p. 70).

Although the fruit of justice is great, Epicurus doesn't encourage people to be active in public life, in business or politics or to interfere with legislation. Such actions can bring power, but that doesn't always bring the personal security from others we hope to find in it. Moreover a public life puts one at a great risk for disturbance. As Epicurus puts it: 'The presence of wealth, honour and admiration among the many will not produce joy or dissolve the disturbance of the soul' (Epicurus, 1994, p. 53). Living a quiet life among like-minded friends will more likely lead to the happy life. Public life is only a prison (Epicurus, 1994, p. 58).

#### 4.3.1.5.4 Friendship

Friendship is of the greatest importance; it provides us with personal security. In Epicurus' hedonistic view, every friendship takes its origin from the benefits it confers on us. Friends provide each other with support and assistance. Safety is impossible without friends. Even the most self-sufficient man sometimes needs someone to take care of him. But Epicurus also states that friendship is worth choosing for its own sake (Epicurus, 1994, p. 23). Friendship is intrinsically valuable. 'Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one's whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship' (Epicurus, 1994, p. xxvii). Although friendship has a hedonistic starting-point, in the maturation of the friendship a friend is no longer considered to be a means to our own happiness, but the friend has become part of our own life, a part of our selves. We no longer only strive for our own pleasure, we'll also seek pleasure for our friends, and it has become a mutual project. Epicurus takes this position to extremes: 'The wise man feels no more pain when he is tortured than when his friend is tortured, and will die on his behalf; for if he betrays his friend, his entire life will be confounded and utterly upset because of a lack of confidence' (Epicurus, 1994, pp. 56–57).

Epicurus considers friendship the most important aspect in social life, while he does not regard sexual relationships equally important. He says that sex hasn't done anyone good, and you can consider yourself lucky if intercourse does not cause any harm<sup>6</sup> (Laertius, cited in Epicurus 1994, p. 43).

Epicurus attitude towards marriage is a subject of controversy (Brennan, 1996; Chilton, 1960), but in general it is agreed that he preferred people not to marry, because in marriage, as Rist (1980, pp. 127–128) put it, 'we leave ourselves open to troubles and inconveniences which may arise from wives and children we could otherwise avoid. So the wise man does not marry and have children'.

Risk avoidance may have been the driving force for this attitude. Marriage and family life implies a strong dependence on a very limited number of individuals and loosing these bonds would inflict serious pain. Larger and more diffused forms of community, such as in the Garden, are less dangerous. The reasoning behind this position parallels that on food, and the dislike of dependence on specific (unnecessary)

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<sup>6</sup> Some suggest that Epicurus' negative opinion about sex is caused by an error in translation, see Brennan (1996) for a discussion.

satisfiers (Annas, 1993, p. 197). This character of Epicurus' philosophy seems apparent when he states that his followers should not mourn a friend who dies before they do, as if there was need for pity.

Note however that our interpretation is not consistent with the extreme loyalty that Epicurus asks from good friends (Rist, 1980, p. 128). A second point to remember is that the modern institution of marriage between two equal partners has a lot in common with the friendship Epicurus idealized.

#### 4.4 Reception

In the course of history the critics of Epicureanism have been representing Epicurus' philosophy as a lazy-minded, shallow, pleasure-loving, immoral or godless travesty of real philosophy (Hutchinson, 1994). His dismissal of the non-hedonistic virtues, his retreat from politics and the idea that our soul disperses when we die, gave rise to opposition by Christians, academic philosophers and political authorities and to the distortion of his message. The fact that Epicurus lived and taught in a closed community, the Garden in which he was honoured as a god and in which also slaves and women were welcomed, didn't contribute to a clear understanding of his philosophy either: outsiders could only guess what was going on inside and this led to many speculations. The presence of hetaerae led to rumours and provided opponents of Epicurus' school with an excuse to paint the Garden as a school for scandal and orgies (Jones, 1989, p. 19). Today the word 'Epicureanism' has even come to mean a life stance that implies the pursuit of sensual pleasures, a pretentious enthusiasm for rare and expensive food and drink.

Although many of Epicurus' contemporaries were very critical towards his happiness advice, his advice on how to live a happy life must have made sense to the people living in Hellenistic times; Epicurean communities sprang up all over the Mediterranean world and students hardly ever left the commune for other philosophical systems (Hutchinson, 1994). For many it was a workable way to come to terms with the changing and changed world they lived in. We can also be quite confident that his philosophy worked for Epicurus himself. As he wrote on his dying day:

*'I write this to you while experiencing a blessedly happy day, and at the same time the last day of my life. Urinary blockages and dysenteric discomforts afflict me, which could not be surpassed for their intensity. But against all these things are ranged the joy in my soul produced by the recollection of the discussions we have had' (Laertius, cited in Epicurus 1994, p.79)*

He died in a way that was consistent to his teachings about tolerance to disease, peacefully and cheerfully (Bitsori & Galanakis, 2004).

#### 4.5 Applicability of the advice today

Epicurus' advice for leading a happy life was tailored to the situation of his time. Are his recommendations still of use today? Below we will try to answer that question by comparing Epicurus' counsel with conditions for happiness observed in present day society. For that purpose we use the large body of empirical research on life satisfaction in western nations in the second half of the 20th century and inspect how well these data fit Epicurus' recommendations for a happy life. Epicurus' concept of happiness is compatible with the definition of happiness that is used in empirical studies, that is, 'subjective enjoyment of life-as-a-whole'.

#### 4.5.1 Back away from society?

Epicurus tried to shelter his followers from the Hellenistic world of his times in which the old securities were gone. He started a mini-society—the Garden—and many of his followers lived in similar communes. The organization of the Garden was hierarchical and Epicurus was the only one who was awarded the title 'wise man'. He strove to create a secure and comfortable atmosphere through friendship. The association between members of the Garden was freer than was usual in other schools, and members did not have to give up their private properties (Jones, 1989, pp. 20–21). Epicurus recognized that happiness is enhanced in social conditions that provide security and allow most autonomy/freedom (Veenhoven, 2002, p. 21).

Although living in the Garden provided a relatively safe, protected life with a full stomach, it is another thing to say that isolating yourself in such a commune is a wise idea. Living in a hierarchical community limits the freedom of choice for its members, for important choices in life are already taken on the basis of the philosophical doctrine of the commune. An example is that active political involvement in the outside world is strongly discouraged. The commune therefore does not encourage the members to make their own choices in life, which appears to be crucial aspects of the multiple-choice societies that enhance happiness (Veenhoven, 1999). To follow a path in life that is prescribed by a leader of a commune, implies that the individual members do not give an autonomous evaluation of all aspects of their own living conditions. Instead, the commune makes important choices for them to assure harmony within the commune. If all individuals would think for themselves and pursue their own ideas of happiness, heterogeneity, disagreement and conflict would result and the concept of the ideal, hierarchical community is threatened. This is what Crombag and Van Dun (1997) call an 'utopic paradox'. Happiness is the positive evaluation of one's life as a whole, but living in a commune makes it impossible to make this evaluation autonomous. The members cannot decide for themselves what is best for them. One problem with this position is that it did not allow Epicurus to pay proper attention to personality differences. For example, it is easy to imagine that somebody high on sensation-seeking who likes to live on the edge will not be happy with the tranquility that Epicurus envisioned in his Garden. So living conditions in the Garden may have been favourable and Epicurus an enlightened ruler, but the resulting happiness of the members lacked an essential ingredient: the individualistic evaluation of living conditions and the freedom of choice that is based on these individual preferences.

#### 4.5.2 Avoid public life

Epicurus felt that politics and public life only involve needless mental stress and should be avoided. Participation in the social life of the Garden was a substitute for involvement in society at large. The consequence was that people became more dependent on community life. With modern data in mind we must conclude that Epicurus' philosophy regarding one's position in society, limited the options for his followers in an unwarranted way. To be engaged in public life will certainly cause some problems, but the net effect on happiness appears to be positive. In present day society at least, we see a strong correlation between happiness and social involvement.<sup>7</sup> Happiness is typically higher among employed people (WDH section E 2), among people who go out often (WDH section L 3) and among members of voluntary associations (WDH section S 7). The withdrawal from the many is not the optimal choice for the majority of people.

#### 4.5.3 Renounce fame and wealth

The desire for fame, status and wealth is unnecessary and unnatural according to Epicurus. He stated that you had to free yourself from the prison of general education and politics (Epicurus, 1994, p. 58). The findings gathered in the WDH show that happiness correlates positively with social rank (WDH section S 9), education (WDH section E 2), occupation (WDH section O 1), and social participation (WDH sections S 6–8). Again, Epicurus' concern with avoiding sources of possible pain leads him to reject an important source of happiness.

An interesting aspect is Epicurus' position on income. Epicurus is right for modern readers that income (I 9) does not contribute much to happiness (Epicurus, 1994, p. 67), and modern people value happiness far above wealth (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). But it is questionable if Epicurus was also right for his contemporaries. Income is a powerful predictor of happiness in developing countries (Veenhoven, 2002). One can only speculate about the significance of income in classical Greece, but it would not be a great surprise if more income would be of importance in those days in which economic development was not comparable to that of modern industrial nations.

#### 4.5.4 Focus on friends

Not only the quality of society matters; also the position one has in a society is of influence on happiness. Intimate personal relationships with a partner and friends are strongly correlated with happiness (e.g. Headey & Wearing, 1992). The many findings on these matters are gathered in the WDH, sections M 1–4 (marriage), F 1–3 (family), F 6 (friends). Epicurus recognized how important personal relations are. He valued affective relationships very much, and in particular friendships.

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<sup>7</sup> Since research is abundant, we will not cite all the studies separately. Instead, we will note the section on correlational findings in the World Database of Happiness (WDH) where these data can be found (Veenhoven, 2006).



‘Friendship dances around the world announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness’ (Epicurus, 1994, p. 52).

Epicurus valued friendship above marital relationship. Note, however, that Epicurus may have had a higher opinion of marriage as it is in the modern age, because partner relationships nowadays are more often based on the friendship between equals.

The existing data suggest that marriage is more important than friendship for modern readers. The correlations between happiness and being married (M 2) tend to be stronger than the correlations between happiness and contacts with friends (F 6). Likewise, married women without a close friend were found to be happier than unmarried people with a close friend (Ventegodt, 1996, p. 170). One can conclude that Epicurus may have placed too much emphasis on generic friendship and at the expense of specific marital ties.

The data indicate that happiness is served by specificity in social bonding. Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) describe in a large sample of Americans under the age of 55, that on average married people are happier than cohabiting people, cohabiting people are happier than the ones that are steady dating, steady dating people are happier than multiple daters, and the multiple daters are happier than the non-daters. However, this does not mean that Epicurus is not right. His point is that the disadvantages of marriage are greater than the satisfactions. In modern terms this implies that it is too risky to be dependent on specific desires (a spouse), because of the pain that marital conflict, divorce or widowhood would bring. We have already seen that the married are happier than unmarried, so they can live with average marital conflict, but we should also weigh the yields of marriage against the costs of divorce and widowhood. We will do that in a paragraph below.

#### 4.5.5 Healthy living

Epicurus regarded health of the body as one of the most important determinants of happiness, but he placed even more emphasis on the health of the soul. When the mind is free of disturbance then the pains of the body are endurable, and do not have to affect our happiness. We can learn to push back pains and discomfort through mental pleasures.

Epicurus’ remarks about this subject fit modern findings on the relationship between happiness and health. Health is strongly related to happiness, in particular self-rated health. ‘The impact of health on happiness depends for a great part on the individual’s perception of the situation’ (Diener et al., 1999, p. 287). This links up with the finding that happiness is more strongly related to mental health than to physical health (WDH Sections M 7 and P 6). Or, as Epicurus would have put it, a mind free of disturbance would not only enhance physical health, but would also help to deal with the hardships of sickness. We can still be happy when our physical condition is not good.

#### 4.5.6 A detached stance to life

The above-mentioned findings give an impression of the strengths and the weaknesses for present day conditions of Epicurus' advice. Still, it can be argued that this is not the essential part of his happiness advice. His central idea is that one should not seek happiness in specific living conditions, but that one should be able to achieve happiness regardless of external conditions. He stimulates internal coping. To evaluate this position, we will consider it in the light of modern psychology.

Happiness is the Chief Good in Epicurus' philosophy, but it is important to note that he does not value positive affect all that much. Happiness is conceived as absence of pain, but even the pain is not that important, because he states that the severest pains are easy to endure. Epicurus' hedonism has strong stoic or ascetic tendencies. Parducci (1995, pp. 17–18) comments: Epicurus' 'position was to establish an ascetic detachment from material conditions so as to minimize the pain of their loss. Although Epicurus claimed that a man could be happy even in a rack, it is not clear that he believed genuine happiness to be possible'.

The position of Epicurus is difficult to judge, because of the seeming inconsistency of his remarks that pleasure is the same as the absence of pain and the idea that pain is easy to bear. Our interpretation is that Epicurus placed pleasure and pain on a continuum and that a person can experience either positive or negative affect. However he also recognized that people reflect on their affective experience and that this meta-appraisal can make a difference. This interpretation makes it possible to highlight several strengths and weaknesses of his happiness advice.

Epicurus was probably wrong with his idea about the continuum of positive and negative affect. Pleasure and pain are registered independently from each other in our brains (e.g. Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999). Pain relief and the escape from expected pain leads to positive affect (e.g. Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991), but continuous absence of pain does not necessarily lead to happy tranquillity, but can also be boring. Headey and Wearing (1992) describe the fact that a significant minority of people have low levels of psychological distress and are unhappy at the same time. Csikszentmihaly (1999) states that happiness results from optimal functioning that can be found between boredom and anxiety. These findings contradict Epicurus' notion of happiness as mere absence of pain. Epicurus' happiness advice does not cater for exhilarating aspects of a business man's life that involves risks and losses but also makes one live to the full and be happy on balance. He also did not think of anhedonia, the inability to experience emotion, that is characteristic of people with a depressive disorder. This condition is often more difficult to bear than emotional pain itself. Happiness is definitely something other than the mere absence of all pain (Bergsma, 1995).

Headey and Wearing (1992, pp. 4–8) also notice that some people are happy despite the fact that they experience high levels of psychological distress. People often perceive life as both quite satisfying and quite stressful. This goes against Epicurus' idea that happiness can be equated with absence of pain. Still, the combination of high distress with happiness can be reconciled with Epicurus' philosophy, because of his idea that we can learn to tolerate pain.

The independence of positive and negative affect has two consequences for Epicurus' position. His notion that avoiding pain is sufficient for establishing a good quality of life may be too conservative. The second consequence is that he neglected the role of positive affect. We start with a discussion of his ideas to avoid pain.

#### 4.5.7 Avoid pain and greed

Epicurus' idea that we should not want too much is a consequence of his tendency to avoid the risk of pain. Strong desires can make us miserable if we have to live without the objects of our desires. Epicurus' idea not to indulge seems to be fruitful. Csikszentmihaly (1999) praises Epicurus because his philosophy encourages people to defer gratifications. Epicurus claimed that all pain was evil, but that we should not avoid pain, when this saves us more pain in the long run. The same is true for pleasures. All pleasures are good, but we should not indulge if the pleasures harm us in the long run.

Moderation in pleasures turns out to be successful in terms of happiness. Headey and Wearing (1992, pp. 92–93) show that such a pleasure-hunting lifestyle fails in the long run. The purely hedonistic way of life often means that people fail to maintain intimate relationships, whereas such relationships form a great source of happiness.

The question is whether Epicurus emphasized deferring gratifications too much. He favoured a serene life with the motto: 'If a little is not enough for you, nothing is.' There are three ways to evaluate this position. The first is a discussion of the limits of willpower, the second focuses on the optimal level of openness to pleasurable experiences and the third is a discussion of the merits of modest aspirations. We start with willpower.

##### 4.5.7.1 Can we restrain?

Self-regulation can be thought of as the internal resource that is used by the self to make decisions, respond actively, and exert self-control. Epicurus' philosophy of the good life requires that one should not spontaneously indulge in pleasures, but always ask what the consequences are in the long run. If I will enjoy this excellent food, how big is the danger that I will get frustrated if I would have to do without it later? Following Epicurus seems to require a lot of self-regulation and it has become clear that willpower is a limited resource (e.g. Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004).

##### 4.5.7.2 How much enjoyment is too much?

This theoretical point can be explained by results from happiness research. Hedonism is the way of life in which pleasure plays an important role, and as we noted above, it is possible to take this position to the extreme. A drug addict whose life deteriorates in the hunt for another pleasurable shot can serve as an example in this respect. But does this mean that we should curtail our pleasures to the limit that is necessary for our survival? The question has not had a lot of attention in research, but Veenhoven (2003) presents data that suggest that a 'heavy dose of pleasure' does not limit happiness or longevity in the long run. Having sex frequently and valuing free

time show a linear positive correlation with happiness, and the use of stimulants an inverted U-curve. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) describe the fact that an orientation toward pleasure makes a (small) contribution to well-being, without harming the quest for meaning or engagement in life.

Perhaps these results indicate that we should use our resources for self-regulation especially if it comes to big issues in life, and we should not value pleasure over finding meaning and engagement. We waste our resources by focusing on minor points like limiting innocent pleasures.

#### 4.5.7.3 Can we want too much?

Epicurus claims that high aspirations are a threat to happiness, because of the risk of ‘unnecessary’ frustration. Several modern psychologists agree, and lowering aspirations and expectations is a part of the program that Fordyce (1977, 1983) has developed to increase personal happiness. Yet empirical studies do not show that happy people have want less than the unhappy. To the contrary, happy people set typically higher aspirations and expect more positive outcomes (WDH section L 7). This has several reasons: one is that wants keep us going and that fully functioning makes us feel happy. Wanting nothing often means doing nothing. Another reason is that happiness works as a go-signal and stimulates us to reach out and achieve things (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001).

#### 4.5.8 The role of positive affect

Though there is certainly a point in moderation, Epicurus has overstated that case. Possibly he did so in his role as a teacher. Exaggerating the dangers of hedonism may be the best way to counter possible side effects. But the idea that Epicurus made a mistake for educational purposes does not seem to be the whole story. The way Epicurus thought about happiness as the opposite of pain, made him think too easily about positive affect. It was something that would happen to you more or less automatically if you were in the right frame of mind. He cognitively explained away the fears for the gods and death and added: ‘what is good is easy to get.’ This is why Epicurus advises readers to be too passive in their pursuit of happiness. Annas (1993, p. 198) puts it like this: ‘Epicurean happiness is bought at the price of adjusting the agent too thoroughly to the world, that is too passive a conception of human life.’ In contemporary life data suggest that happiness is better served with active involvement in society. We not only want a mind that is free of disturbance, but we also have the possibility to try to control the interaction with the environment so that we can change our (view of the) world so that it better suits our preferences.

Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001) ‘broaden-and-build’ theory of positive affect gives a theoretical underpinning of this idea. Her first key position is that positive affect broadens the individual’s momentary mindset, and she urges one to play, explore and to integrate in social networks. These activities build the resources of the individual, for they lead to the discovery of novel and creative ideas and stronger social bonds.

The importance of positive affect is underlined in several empirical studies and analyses. Positive affect stimulates health and longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Pressman & Cohen, 2005), finding meaning in life (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities (Carver, 2003) and also leads to success. Positive affect promotes sociability and activity, altruism, liking of self and others, effective conflict resolution skills and perhaps original thinking (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). It is a serious omission that Epicurus neglects the constructive aspects of positive affect. Happiness is better served by a full life with pleasure, meaning and engagement (Peterson et al., 2005), than with an empty life that focuses primarily on avoiding pain.

#### 4.5.9 Acquiescence

There is one aspect of the ‘four basic truths’ that escapes the analysis in the paragraphs above. The statement that ‘what is terrible is easy to endure’ adds a dimension to Epicurus philosophy, that fits in with the spiritual tradition that places greater emphasis not on an emotional high, but on a state of peace, tranquility and understanding (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Epicurus four-part cure has three remarks on coping with pain (fear of Gods, death and terrible pain) and all three boil down to the idea that it is not necessary to lose emotional equilibrium over these stressors. Above we have noted that Epicurus does not stimulate people enough to actively pursue happiness, but it is another matter when he offers wisdom in dealing with hardships.

The first thing to notice is that Epicurus’ advice focuses on the hardest parts of existence. Death, disease, terrible pain, the impossibility of changing the past and ill fate (the gods) are mentioned explicitly. These stressors have in common that they are unchangeable. Efforts to change the event itself will only yield frustration and desperation. Persons have to find a way to cope with this difficult psychological content. The direct approach to this is to try to change the frequency or intensity of these difficult thoughts and feelings. There are certainly occasions where this works. Abbe, Tkach, and Lyubomirsky (2003) claim that dispositionally happy persons use distraction successfully in dealing with problems. But sometimes the attempts to escape make things worse. For example, avoidance seems to be at the heart of several forms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (Abueg, Follette, & Ruzek, 2001). The efforts to change one’s negative feelings can make them stronger (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

##### 4.5.9.1 Coping with pain

How can we tell the difference between emotion regulation processes that reduce or increase the impact of negative experiences? There have been several attempts to understand this difference (e.g. Gross, 1998a, b). A useful distinction in this respect is the difference between suppression of negative emotional content and reappraisal of the situation. The first tactic increases negative emotion and decreases happiness. Reappraisal has the opposite results (Gross & John, 2003). Epicurus makes the right choice between the two. He reappraises fear of the gods and fear of death in a way as to

suggest that they are no longer relevant for our emotional well-being, but he does not suppress these fears for he lets them take the centre stage in his philosophy. Another question is if Epicurus' reappraisals are strong enough to make a meaningful difference for emotional reactions.

The idea that pain is easy to endure cannot simply be classified as a form of suppression or reappraisal. It is a second-order change, a change on the meta level (Hayes, 2001). The central idea behind Epicurus' remarks seems to be that people can allow themselves to feel the pain for it is quite possible to endure it without being too much disturbed by it. This interpretation requires some goodwill and reading between the lines, but if it is correct, then it is reasonable to expect that reading Epicurus can make it easier to deal with the pain. Calm acceptance of mental content, as is encouraged by diverse schools of thought behind Buddhism, psychoanalytic free association and systematic desensitization, seems to be a helpful thing to do. Empirical evidence suggests that it helps in dealing with a wide range of psychological disorders (Hayes, Folette, & Linehan, 2004), physical pain and a variety of well-being outcomes (Kabat-Zinn, 2000). One of the positive aspects of acceptance is that it helps with the experience of negative psychological content, without a need to act or ruminate if the situation is unchangeable. This makes it possible to deal with hardship without making things worse by avoidance, negative thoughts about the self or counterproductive action. For example, accepting that you feel bad because you crave for alcohol, can actually prevent relapse to binge drinking. The paradox is that people can regain control over their lives if they discontinue their efforts to get a better grip.

#### 4.5.9.2 Mindfulness

If we take this reasoning one step further, we can link the concept of 'enduring pain' also with well-being outside the realm of clinical populations. Brown and Ryan (2003) investigated the effects of mindfulness, a concept that is closely related to acquiescence, but adds the dimensions of willingly taking in positive and negative psychological content. Mindfulness requires a more active and alert attitude than mere acceptance. Ryan and Brown (2003, p. 822) quote two different descriptions of mindfulness: 'the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at successive moments of perception' and 'keepings one's consciousness alive to the present reality'.

Being mindful correlates positively with life satisfaction, vitality, autonomy, competence and positive affect and negatively with negative affect, reported physical symptoms, depression, anxiety and impulsiveness. Experimental manipulation to enhance mindfulness also yielded positive results (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Mindfulness skills are gaining attention from psychotherapists, because they can be of help for clients who have to overcome adversity. The *Journal Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* devoted a special issue to mindfulness in 2003. Bear (20003) states: 'The empirical literature on the effects of mindfulness training contains many methodological weaknesses, but it suggests that mindfulness interventions may lead to

reductions in a variety of problematic conditions, including pain, stress, anxiety, depressive relapse, and disordered eating.’

Mindfulness can be a positive factor in life and Epicurus seemed to have realized this in his ideas about enduring pain and living deliberately and prudently, without the need to act on the feelings of the moment. Epicurus’ philosophy is worthwhile in dealing with hardship and pain, although it requires some active interpretation of his texts to use them constructively. Paradoxically, Epicurus underestimated the tolerance people have for minor pains, for he advised them to shy away from involvement in society as a means of pain reduction, ignoring the fact that the positive experiences linked with involvement can offer enough compensation for the hassles.

The combination of acceptance with passivity and moderation in the hunt for pleasurable experiences also implies a danger. Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (2001) suggest that the line between stoic resignation and acceptance is not always clear and that the resignation has adverse consequences. Acceptance seems to be a healthy alternative, if it brings somebody to abandon goals that are no longer within reach and to engage in the pursuit of alternative goals that still are possible. If somebody with a deadly disease abandons all hope and accepts the inevitable, this seems to shorten the lifespan. A healthier alternative is if one decides what can still be done with the time left, for example spend more time with family. Acceptance is harmful when it implies stoic ‘goallessness’.

#### *4.6 Does refraining from marriage pay off?*

##### *4.6.1 An empirical test*

Annas (1993) describes Epicurus’ philosophy as being risk averse. It is better to avoid pain than to indulge in pleasures. In the paragraphs above we concluded on the basis of a mixture of theoretical and empirical arguments that this position is too strict. Still this exercise is not completely convincing from an Epicurean point of view, for the philosopher does not argue that plain bread is just as tasty as lobster, but that the preference for lobster causes problems if one becomes dependent on it, in that life might take such a turn that a person has to live without it. In a similar vein, he argues that marriage may involve pleasures, but that these are not sufficient to compensate for the inconveniences. For a modern reader the inconveniences would translate as marital conflict, divorce or widowhood. In other words, it is in Epicurus’ view that the lifetime benefits of marriage do not weight up against its costs and one can better abstain from marriage. In this section we will check whether this claim applies today. It is established that married people are typically happier than the unmarried<sup>8</sup> but that among the unmarried the never married are happier than previously married but divorced or widowed people (e.g. Glenn & Weaver, 1988; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997; Waite, 1995). Clark and Oswald (2002) translated the experience of life-events relating to partnerships into a monetary ‘compensation amount’. In their calculation, marriage

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<sup>8</sup> We use the term ‘married’ for all people living together in a relationship with a partner.

has a happiness value of £70.000 a year, and widowhood could be compensated with a monetary sum of £170,000 a year. In other words, you have to stay married for 3 years to compensate for 1 year of widowhood. Evidently, those figures are biased because they are derived from reactions to life changes, and it is known that people have amazing ability to adjust to adverse circumstances and that happiness tends to return to baseline level in time (e.g. Headey & Wearing, 1992; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996).

Following Epicurus warnings we should consider the number of years that people spend in each type of marital status. If people who marry are likely to spend a long period of life divorced or widowed, this could have a substantial effect on their overall happiness. In order to evaluate this issue we use the concept of ‘happy life years’ (HLY), as introduced by Veenhoven (1996). This concept is defined as the number of happy years a person is expected to live. It is calculated by multiplying the number of years a person is expected to live by a happiness weight factor for each of these years. This weight factor will vary with the marital status. Mathematically, this could be expressed as

$$HLY = \sum Y_p * H_p$$

where HLY is the number of Happy Life Years, P is a vector of possible states that a person can occupy,  $Y_p$  is the number of years a person lives in state P, and  $H_p$  is the happiness weight factor attached to state P.

#### 4.6.2 Method

In order to estimate the number of HLY over the life time, decisions have to be taken on (a) the number of positions P that should be distinguished, (b) the number of years people spend in each of these positions, and (c) the calculation of the happiness weights that are attached to each of the positions. We will discuss each of these three issues in turn.

Most research on the relationship between happiness and marital status compares the happiness of married people with those of the never married, divorced and widowed. This does not take into account the increasing complexity of partner relationships. As a result of the increasing popularity of unmarried cohabitation, living apart together, divorce, and remarriage, people often occupy a diversity of positions during their life course. Since we are not able to take all this potential complexity into account, we make a distinction between five possible marital statuses: (a) never married, (b) first marriage, (c) divorced or separated, (d) remarried (e) widowed. We do not differentiate formal and informal marriage. The latter phenomenon has gained popularity in many Western countries during the last few decades and the relation with happiness is similar (Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). The second thing to notice is that we make a distinction between people in their first ‘marriage’ and people in their ‘second marriage’. This is done because well-being in a second marriage is often lower than in a first marriage (Kurdek, 1990; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). The next question is then what part of their lives people spend in each of these five states. In our opinion, it does



not make sense to calculate this for the ‘average’ person. Rather, one would want to describe different marital careers. In Table 1 we present six common marital careers in present day Dutch society. The first life course type is that of the never married and exemplifies the advice of Epicurus to shun marriage. Life course types II and III are typical for people who marry and do not divorce. For half of the partners these unions will be dissolved by the death of the spouse. Life course types IV, V, and VI exemplify the varied experiences of people who experience divorce or separation. Some will not remarry (type IV), some will remarry and live with their new partner until death (type V) and some will remarry and experience the death of their second spouse (type VI). Evidently, some life courses will be more complicated than the six we have outlined here. However, these will only constitute a very small minority of all life courses.

**Table 1** Overview of different types of life courses

| Type | Sequence of events                         |
|------|--|
| I    | Never married—death                        |
| II   | Married—death                              |
| III  | Married—widowhood—death                    |
| IV   | Married—divorce—death                      |
| V    | Married—divorce—remarriage—death           |
| VI   | Married—divorce—remarriage—widowhood—death |

For each of these six life course types one would like to know at what average age transitions between marital statuses occur and what proportion of the population experience each of the six life courses. This is problematic given that life courses differ strongly between cohorts. Here, we try to solve this issue by constructing synthetic life courses (Willekens, 1999). Based on period-specific information, we estimate how life courses would evolve if the occurrence and timing of partner-related events that is observed in recent years would continue into the future. We made estimates based on two sources: officially published data of Statistics Netherlands, and survey data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005). In the first wave of the NKPS, information on life courses was collected from more than 8,000 persons, forming a representative sample of the Dutch population of age 15 and over. In Table 2, estimates of the average ages at which specific transitions occur are presented, whereas in Table 3 the distribution of the population across the six life course types is presented.<sup>9</sup> Given that the ages at which men and women experience family-related life

<sup>9</sup> These figures do not add up to 100%, as a small proportion of people in the Netherlands experience life courses with multiple union formations and dissolutions. Their numbers are too small and their life courses too varied to allow further analysis.

events differ quite substantially, these calculations are performed separately for men and women.

**Table 2** Average age for different transitions in partner status, by sex

| Event                        | Average age men             | Average age women           |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| First marriage               | 26                          | 23                          |
| Divorce                      | 35                          | 32                          |
|                              | (After 9 years of marriage) | (After 9 years of marriage) |
| Remarriage                   | 38                          | 36                          |
|                              | (3 years after divorce)     | (4 years after divorce)     |
| Widowhood                    | 71                          | 69                          |
| Death of never married ind,  | 74                          | 80                          |
| Death of married individual  | 78                          | 82                          |
| Death of widowed individual  | 76                          | 81                          |
| Death of divorced individual | 75                          | 80                          |

The final issue concerns the estimation of the happiness weights that need to be attached to each partner status position. To estimate these weights we used an abridged version of the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale that has been used in the NKSP. This version contains five items: three about negative affect and two about positive affect (Dykstra et al., 2005). We considered the questions about positive affect (feeling

**Table 3** Distribution of the Dutch population by life course type and sex (in percentage of the total male and female population)

| Type | Sequence of events                         | Men | Women |
|------|--|-----|-------|
| I    | Never married—death                        | 6   | 6     |
| II   | Married—death                              | 48  | 20    |
| III  | Married—widowhood—death                    | 21  | 47    |
| IV   | Married—divorce—death                      | 10  | 12    |
| V    | Married—divorce—remarriage—death           | 9   | 3     |
| VI   | Married—divorce—remarriage—widowhood—death | 3   | 9     |

happy and composed and calm) and negative affect (feeling nervous, depressed and miserable and dejected) to be equally important. Therefore we used the answer to the question about happiness twice. We added the three positive scores and subtracted the negative ones and translated this score to a scale of zero to one.<sup>10</sup> Table 4 presents the average happiness scores for each marital status position. These scores are in line with results from earlier research. Happiness scores are highest for those in their first marriage, followed by the remarried. Scores are substantially lower for the never married, the divorced and the widowed. In addition, happiness is lower among women. This is particularly true for happiness among married and remarried women, mirroring the fact that the gains from marriage are smaller for women than for men.

**Table 4** Average Happiness score (scale 0–1) according to partner status and sex

| Partner status | Men  | Women |
|----------------|------|-------|
| Never married  | 0.72 | 0.70  |
| Married        | 0.79 | 0.75  |
| Divorced       | 0.70 | 0.69  |
| Remarried      | 0.76 | 0.72  |
| Widowed        | 0.72 | 0.70  |

#### 4.6.3 Results

Using the information from Tables 2 and 4, the number of HLY from age 18 onwards was calculated for each life course type. In Table 5 the results from this calculation are presented, again separately for men and women. From Table 5, it is clear that the preferable life course in terms of the number of HLY is to live with one spouse until death. Compared to people who never lived with a partner, the difference in HLY is more than six years for men and more than 4 years for women. This result clearly contradicts Epicurus' advice that it is best to refrain from marriage altogether. At the same time, Epicurus is right that marital break-up, either by divorce or widowhood leads to a reduction in HLY. Still, for all people who experienced marital break-up (Types III to VI), the number of HLY is at least equal to that of the never married. Only among people who experience a divorce and do not remarry, is HLY about equal to the HLY of the never married. From these results, it seems safe to conclude that Epicurus' skepticism about marriage is not warranted. In present day society at least, the gains in happiness are greater than the costs. The desire for a partner cannot be classified as 'natural and unnecessary'.

<sup>10</sup> We also used an alternative method in which we constructed a Likert-scale based on the five items. The results hardly differed from the ones presented here.

**Table 5** Number of HLY after age 18, by life course type and sex

| Type | Sequence of events                         | Men  | Women |
|------|--|------|-------|
| I    | Never married—death                        | 40.1 | 43.1  |
| II   | Married—death                              | 46.6 | 47.8  |
| III  | Married—widowhood—death                    | 44.7 | 46.4  |
| IV   | Married—divorce—death                      | 40.9 | 43.2  |
| V    | Married—divorce—remarriage—death           | 45.4 | 46.0  |
| VI   | Married—divorce—remarriage—widowhood—death | 43.9 | 45.0  |

In addition, comparing the HLY of men and women allow some interesting observations. First of all, it can be noted that the HLY of each life course type is higher for women than for men. This suggests that the higher life expectancy of women compensates for the lower level of happiness per year. Although women are less happy than men in almost every partner status, the final HLY are higher because they live longer than men. Second, the HLY of men and women following the most common life course type (type II for men and type III for women) hardly differ at all. In that sense, it seems that the lifetime happiness of men and women following the modal life course for their sex is more or less the same. Third, the difference in HLY between types I and II is smaller for women than for men. This results from two facts: women gain less happiness from marriage than men and the difference in life expectancy between the never married and the married is smaller for women than for men. Still, even women seem well advised not to pay too much attention to the teachings of Epicurus regarding family life.

#### 4.6.4 Limitations

Finally, we would like to point out some of the limitations of this empirical exercise. A first limitation is that we did not differentiate happiness within partner statuses, for instance by age or by duration since the start of the status. It seems unlikely, however, that refining the analysis in this respect would yield results that are substantially different from the ones presented here.<sup>11</sup>

Another limitation is that we constructed synthetic life courses. It does not reflect the life course of specific cohorts, but rather assumes that patterns observed in the present time will hold for the future as well. Evidently, that will not necessarily be true. For instance, it might well be that the proportion of marriages ending in divorce will

<sup>11</sup> We checked this by applying a model in which the happiness weights for each partner status were allowed to vary by age, if a regression model showed that happiness for that partner status varied significantly by age. The results from this more complicated model differed little from the ones presented in Table 5.

increase. If so, more people will follow life course types IV, V and VI, shifting the HLY of the total population downwards. A third issue relates to selection and causality. For example, it is reasonable to expect that selection processes partly determine who will get married and who will stay single all of their lives. Some of the people who stay unmarried may be selective on characteristics that increase the chances of unhappiness. If so, the impact of life events on HLY is overestimated. However, research has shown that marriage has a substantial protective effect, suggesting that even after controlling for selection, some differences in HLY between life course types would remain (Brockmann & Klein, 2004; Lillard & Waite, 1995).

A final limitation is that the analysis is about the average person. For specific individuals the costs of marriage may exceed the benefits, as seems to be the case in low quality marriages (Hawking & Booth, 2005). These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that the analyses presented give added weight to our conclusion that Epicurus too rigidly advised people to be passive in life, for all he wanted them to do is to avoid pain. Sometimes it is better to go for specific pleasures as well.

#### *4.7 Discussion*

Epicurus showed a lot of confidence in his happiness advice. At the end of his Letter to Menoeceus he wrote: ‘Practise these and the related precepts day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend, and you will never be disturbed either when awake or in sleep, and you will live as a god among men.’ A more ambivalent picture arises from our assessment of the applicability of his happiness advice today.

##### *4.7.1 Recommendations that apply today*

It is positive that Epicurus mentions the importance of the bio-psychological needs of people, and that fulfilling these needs will contribute greatly to happiness. Also his observation that intimate relationships, and especially friendships enhance happiness more than materialism and status, stands the test of modern data. His advice to live a life with moderate and varied pleasures turns out to be valid, although he exaggerated the need for deferring gratification. His ideas about the importance of a healthy lifestyle seem to be correct as well. In these respects it won’t do us any harm to follow his advice today.

##### *4.7.2 Recommendations that don’t apply today*

However, there are two noticeable exceptions. Research findings do not support his advice to prefer friendship to marriage and to avoid public life. For this he offered the alternative of living in a commune of like-minded people. For his contemporaries this may have been enough compensation, given the societal turmoil of his time, but this way of life is not appropriate for present-day readers.

#### 4.7.3 Unnecessary unhappiness

The value of Epicurus' advice, however, is not that he pointed to a unique direction that would always make people happy. The central aim of his philosophy is find a cure for 'unnecessary' unhappiness, that is the low well-being of people that have their basic needs fulfilled, but who still feel bad because they want things they cannot have. This advice shares many characteristics with modern day cognitive behavioral therapy that aims to cure counterproductive patterns of thinking and reacting and to replace them by more realistic and helpful ones.

In Epicurus' happiness advice a lot of attention is given to the unchangeable stressors of life, such as death, disease, terrible pain and ill fate (the gods). He encourages his followers to confront these facts of life, without losing emotional equilibrium. The core of the self does not need to be touched by the hardships. We do not know how effective this approach is for the readers of his texts, but research about acceptance (Hayes, 2001) indicates that this may be a fruitful approach for dealing with difficult emotions.

However, Epicurus' focus on avoiding negative affect has two serious side effects if it is used as inspiration for dealing with life. The first is that Epicurus—for a hedonist—had a surprisingly negative view of positive affect. He conceived happiness as the absence of pain and this implied that there was little need to pursue positive experiences. Escaping pain was enough. This runs counter to what is known today about the active lifestyle of happy persons and about the independence of positive and negative affect. For the art of life, you need positive goals as well.

Epicurus' ideas about friendship and marriage can serve as an example in this respect. Epicurus advised people to focus on a wide circle of friends, and not on a specific bond with one spouse. The idea was that it is too dangerous to become dependent on one person, because of the pains of bad marriage, divorce or widowhood. With the help of a large Dutch survey study we were able to show that this risk avoidance is unwarranted. On average the number of HLY is greater for those that take the risk and became involved in family life. The same can be argued for involvement in public life. On average the yields of involvements more than compensate for the frustrations.

One additional omission that has to be noted is that Epicurus neglected personality differences. Personality is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well-being (e.g. Diener et al., 1999). The happy individual is extravert, optimistic, and worry-free, has internal control, self-esteem and feels in control of his environment. Epicurus' happiness advice does not take personality into account. This might have been because he underestimated the importance of personality traits. Another reason may be that he focused on aspects his followers were able to change. His advice was aimed at overcoming one's fears and being in control of one's own life. A last possible reason may be that personality differences would have had repercussions for his commune in the Garden. It is easier to be an enlightened leader, if you do not have to fuss about personal preferences in life-style.

#### 4.7.4 Limitations to this approach

The present study has several limitations. The first is that Epicurus' advice was aimed at his contemporaries, but we investigated the applicability for modern readers. Some of Epicurus' 'mistakes' may have been caused by this transition. The second is that we used findings from general population surveys to judge the applicability of the advice. A better approach would be to empirically test if present day readers would actually benefit from reading Epicurus. A third limitation is that our judgment is based on our interpretation of Epicurus' philosophy, for which we often followed the lead of Annas (1993). It is an open question whether the average modern reader of Epicurus reads his admonitions in the same way. This question can only be answered by an empirical study and such a study would be worth undertaking, the philosophy of the good life being too important to leave it to intellectual speculation.

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## Arthur's advice

### Comparing Arthur Schopenhauer's advice on happiness with contemporary research

#### Summary

*The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is well known for his pessimism. He did not believe in real happiness. In his view, the best a person can achieve is to reduce misery. At the end of his career, he wrote a book on how to live the most bearable life. This is a practical guide based on his personal experiences and illustrated by quotations from other thinkers subscribing to his views. In this paper, we summarize his recommendations and compare these with conditions for happiness as observed in present day empirical research. Little of the advice appears to fit current research on conditions for happiness. Following Schopenhauer's advice would probably make us unhappier, even if we had the same neurotic personality.*

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## 5.1 Introduction

Optimists think of the earth as a place that is hospitable to the aims and aspirations of human beings, pessimists think of the world as hostile or indifferent. These opposing views are reflected in ideas about happiness. Optimists believe that happiness is within reach and pessimists tend to think of happiness as something rare or only temporary.

The prime defender of the negative view is the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In his major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The world as will and representation) he not only defends the idea that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but takes the view that this is demonstrably the worst of all possible worlds. Schopenhauer painted our world as on the brink of destruction and any changes that one could think of that would make the world worse, would either mean the end of the world or turn out to be an improvement. His treatment of happiness is in line with this bleak picture. He thought it was a mistake to think that people can be happy in this world, since happiness is no more than a transient illusion. As he put it: ‘Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things’ (1958, p. 573).

### 5.1.1 View on happiness

How did Schopenhauer come to his pessimistic view of happiness? Reginster (2004) identified the following reasoning behind Schopenhauer’s position.

Schopenhauer thought of happiness as the satisfaction of desires. The opposite of happiness—suffering—was caused by hindrance of ‘the will’, through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal. The will is the faculty of desire and this hindrance can be called frustration. Schopenhauer’s approach to happiness can be thought of as a form of hedonistic perfectionism. For true happiness we need the complete absence of all pain and the complete satisfaction of all desires.

With this conception in mind, it is no wonder that Schopenhauer thinks that happiness is impossible to achieve for a long time, but temporary happiness seems to be a real possibility, although perhaps only for the happy few. But even this was an illusion according to Schopenhauer, because of the nature of the will. The satisfaction of desires would only bring boredom. When the desires for all determinate objects (acclaim, friendship, a precious painting, finishing reading this paper and so on) have been fulfilled, and no new wishes come to agitate us, boredom sets in. Schopenhauer describes boredom as empty longing.

So it is impossible to satisfy the will, and we are determined to walk the hedonistic treadmill endlessly. We feel pain if the will is blocked and boredom if the desires are satisfied. We are doomed to swing between pain and boredom. The situation is so grave that it would have been better not to exist, but fear of death prevents this easy way out. Given the fact that we have to live our lives, Schopenhauer wrote a practical guide on how to attain, not so much happiness, but a bearable life with the brief moments of happiness that are sought after by modern people (Goll, 2006).

### 5.1.2 Relevance

If Schopenhauer did not believe in true happiness, why then discuss him in this study of happiness advice?

The first reason is that Schopenhauer is of historical significance. He was not only one of the first modern philosophers who treated happiness as a central theme, but he is also responsible for the modern ‘philosophical fear of happiness’ (Rehberg, 2000). His description of happiness as an illusion is one of the reasons that social scientists have long ignored the subject.

The second reason is the large readership of Schopenhauer’s book. Does success on the reader market imply that the advice is of value for readers? Did Schopenhauer, the pessimist par excellence, find a way to deal with the limits of reality without making the idea that this world has little to offer to its inhabitants a self-fulfilling prophecy?

The third reason is the quality of his ideas. He revolted against *Descartes’ error* (Damasio, 1994) for he does not consider thought to be the human essence. He starts his philosophy from the body. Humans are doers that seek control over their environment to meet needs and wants (Young, 1987). If we forget Schopenhauer’s archaic phrase of ‘the will’, then we can recognize the contours of a modern cognitive–motivational–relational theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) in which cognition is the servant of emotion (Calne, 1999).

The fourth reason is the well-known negative association between pessimism and well being (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). Schopenhauer’s happiness advice implies that he thinks it possible to combine a bleak world-view with subjective well being. He even argues that pessimism can be productive. He mentions that suicide out of despair is likely to be found in conjunction with facile optimism that considers happiness a birthright. Suffering is more difficult to bear for an optimist, because it is felt as private, unique and accidental. Pessimism alleviates the sense of loneliness and personal failure that comes with suffering, because these evils are a consequence of the state of affairs in the world (Schopenhauer, 1958; Young, 1987). The question is whether Schopenhauer is (partly) right. Several authors think he has a point. Dienstag (1999) argues that pessimism can enable us to understand our world better and to act within its limits. Pisa (1988) thinks that reading Schopenhauer can foster acceptance and resignation. But in psychological studies pessimists do not behave accordingly. Pessimists tend to turn to overt denial, self-distraction and giving up when facing uncontrollable situations, whereas optimists are better in acceptance and are more likely to seek information (Scheier et al., 2001). Does Schopenhauer encourage pessimists to cope more adaptively?

### 5.1.3 Plan of this paper

We start with an outline of Schopenhauer’s life and work and summarize his view on life and recommendations for making life bearable. Next we place these views in the context of his situation and personality, for it is widely acknowledged that Schopenhauer’s character and his works are deeply intertwined (Copleston, 1975, pp.

xxv–xxvi). We conclude with an assessment of the reality value of the advice, by comparing the recommendations with observed conditions for happiness. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are discussed.

## *5.2 Life and personality*

Arthur Schopenhauer was born on the 22nd of February 1788 in Danzig, which was a Prussian town at that time. His father was a merchant and his mother was a novelist. His father drowned in 1805. His death is generally considered to have been suicide.

### *5.2.1 Career*

The death of his father gave Arthur the opportunity to abandon the career in trading that his father had planned for him and instead to become a scholar. He studied Latin, Greek, the natural sciences and philosophy. In 1813, he received his doctorate in Jena. In 1819, he wrote his major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, for which he received no acclaim. He started to teach at Berlin University. This was not a success either and he left Berlin for Frankfurt am Main. Schopenhauer lived on the money his father had left him.

In Frankfurt, he started work on his last book, *Parerga und Paralipomena*. This work was easy to read and practical in nature and not as complex as his earlier works. Schopenhauer had great difficulty finding a publisher, but when the book came out it was a best seller. His advice grew very popular with the German bourgeoisie and Schopenhauer became a household name. The book brought Schopenhauer the respect and praise he had longed for. He died in Frankfurt in 1860, at the age of 72 (Driesen, 1992, pp. 242–250; Raven, 1997, pp. 219–229).

### *5.2.2 Character*

According to his contemporaries Schopenhauer had a complicated and ill-tempered character. He was hypersensitive and vain. The difficult nature of his relationships with colleagues is well known. He hated Hegel for instance, and planned his lectures at the same time as Hegel held his. Consequently Schopenhauer did not teach any students at all, for Hegel was far more popular. Schopenhauer was hurt by the fact that his books received no popular or critical acclaim.

His personal life also brought him little joy. Schopenhauer's relationship with his mother was very complex. He blamed his mother for his father's death and accused her of wasting his father's inheritance. His mother was a successful writer and often could not stand her son's presence. At one time she forbade him to stay at her house, because she thought he was a depressing know-it-all. Schopenhauer in turn thought her rather stupid and annoying. Even more painful to him was the fact that his mother's books sold very well, while his own books did not. His relationships with other women were unsuccessful and he never married, which he thought better for a philosopher anyway. He generally spoke of women with dismay and he thought them to be mostly ignorant,



wasteful and superficial, although he did admit at the end of his life that he liked women, but believed them not to be interested in him (Raven 1997, p221).

Schopenhauer was preoccupied with his health. Although he was generally in good health, he was always afraid of falling ill. In a document written for himself only (Eisauton), he described how his life was ruled by fear of disease, war and other misfortunes. He liked being alone and was suspicious of friends, whom, he thought, could rarely be trusted. At night he slept with a gun and a sword beside him, ready to defend himself. Everything precious was well hidden and the cleaning lady had strict instructions on how to clean his room. He arranged with his bank that the same clerk always brought his interest to him. He dreaded going to a hairdresser's, fearing that his throat would be cut (Safranski, 1990). He was a rather neurotic man, who preferred the company of dogs to the company of people.

### *5.3 Recommendations for a bearable life*

Schopenhauer considered himself to be a seeker after Truth, however painful that may be. In *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit: Paränesen und Maximen* (part of *Parerga und Paralipomena*), he takes a practical view on how to make the most of a dreadful situation. The book is not so much a philosophy, as a guide to every-day life. In his introduction, Schopenhauer explains what the book is about and his fundamental pessimism when it comes to the possibility of happiness. The central aim of the book is to assist the reader in ordering his or her life in such a way that he or she can obtain the greatest possible amount of pleasure. Schopenhauer's conception of happiness is purely hedonistic, although he himself uses the word eudemonology. 'Eudemonology teaches us how to lead a happy existence' (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 9).

Schopenhauer was aware that he had written a remarkable book, considering his pessimistic views. He writes:

*...Such an existence might perhaps be defined as one which, looked at from a purely objective point of view, or rather, after cool and mature reflection—for the question necessarily involves subjective considerations—would be decidedly preferable to non-existence; implying that we should cling to it for its own sake, and not merely from the fear of death; and further, that we should never like it to come to an end. Now whether human life corresponds, or could possibly correspond, to this conception of existence, is a question to which, as is well known, my philosophical system returns a negative answer... Accordingly, in elaborating the scheme of a happy existence, I have had to make a complete surrender of the higher metaphysical and ethical standpoint to which my own theories lead; and everything I shall say here will to some extent rest upon a compromise (1995, p. 9).*

### 5.3.1 Views on life

In *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit*, Schopenhauer holds three ingredients to be responsible for the destiny of a person. First, what man is (personality and health), second, what man has (property) and finally, man's place in the estimation of others (social position). Schopenhauer emphasises that the first category is the most important, because the perspective on 'reality' depends largely on man's character, and not on the objective events themselves. 'Personality, with all it entails, is the only immediate and direct factor in his happiness and welfare. All else is mediate and indirect, and its influence can be neutralized and frustrated; but the influence of personality never' (1995, p. 20).

#### 5.3.1.1 Personality, or what a man is

According to Schopenhauer (1995, p. 21) personality includes health because the two are intertwined. Good health leads to a cheerful character.

Therefore, subjective blessings—a noble nature, a capable head, a joyful temperament, bright spirits, a well-constituted, perfectly sound physique, in a word, *mens sana in corpore sano*, are the first and most important elements in happiness; so that we should be more intent on promoting and preserving such qualities than on possession of external wealth and external honour.

Schopenhauer explains that superior mental ability helps to prevent tedium and keeps people from pursuing passions that lead to problems. We have to take our character into account and should only do things that suit it.

#### 5.3.1.2 Property, or what a man has

Property is far less significant. Schopenhauer does not believe that wealth is important for happiness and states that satisfaction with one's wages is strongly related to subjective factors. One man can be satisfied with small wage, whereas another man will feel poor with twice the amount. We need enough wealth to live, but more is not necessary. It is preferable to look after our health and try to grow intellectually. Wealth can free us from working, but for many people this is not a blessing as most people would be terribly bored.

#### 5.3.1.3 Position, or man's place in the estimation of others

Our position is least important of all. According to Schopenhauer, people are all born with a desire to be respected, but it is important to realize that other people's opinions of us are not what really count. Vanity makes people vulnerable and lack of respect and fame can make one very unhappy.

#### 5.3.1.4 Stages of life

Schopenhauer divides life into different phases.

- Early youth is the time when we learn about the world around us and we are relatively alone. This is a happy time, because children are naturally close to nature, which changes when they grow up.
- Later youth and adolescence are unhappy because we are constantly looking for happiness that cannot be found in human life. We are disappointed and unhappy.
- In the last period of our life, life is dominated by fear of misfortune. We have come to understand that there is no true happiness to be found in our lives and we will be satisfied with a painless existence. Our energy diminishes, but our experience and insight grow. We can finally see our lives in perspective. Since our libido, which causes trouble, dies away; we can become truly reasonable.

But when old age is reached, all this is over and done with, partly because the blood runs cooler and the senses are no longer so easily allured; partly because experience has shown the true value of things and the futility of pleasure, whereby illusion has been gradually dispelled, and the strange fancies and prejudices which previously concealed or distorted a free and true view of the world, have been dissipated and put to flight (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 115).

In his description of the phases of life, Schopenhauer comforts us with a vision of a relatively pleasant old age when we have finally learned to accept the true nature of life. A life without the illusions and passions of youth is preferable to the constant striving for pleasure that hardly exists at all.

### 5.3.2 Advice for a happier life

In the chapter *Paranäsen und Maximen*, Schopenhauer presents us with a set of practical rules to live by. He starts with a set of general rules, followed by rules about the relationship with oneself. The third set of rules (and greatest in number) deals with behaviour towards other people.

#### 5.3.2.1 General rules

The general rules reflect Schopenhauer's pessimistic view on 'The Will'. It is of no use to walk the hedonistic treadmill, because even if you fulfil your wishes, you will still feel an empty longing. Therefore, it is better not to try too hard. Try to be happy with little and do not pursue happiness, but try to find freedom from pain. A painless state is the closest we can get to happiness. Schopenhauer also proposes a measure for happiness to fit his views:

*'To estimate a man's condition in regard to happiness, it is necessary to ask, not what things please him, but what things trouble him; and the more trivial things are in themselves, the happier the man will be'* (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 14).

Schopenhauer's general rules are influenced by the philosophy of the Stoa and by Buddhism. These philosophies hold that we should limit our expectations of life. The Stoa also strongly propagates an unemotional attitude towards life. We must never let

ourselves be ruled by our emotions. The emphasis on freedom from pain is plainly Buddhist. In Buddhism, life automatically means suffering. It is our task to find a way to handle this suffering, for instance by asceticism.

*‘Whatever fate befalls you, do not give way to great rejoicings or lamentations; partly because all things are full of change, and your fortune may turn at any moment; partly because men are so apt to be deceived in their judgement as to what is good or bad for them’* (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 90).

#### 5.3.2.2 Our relationship with ourselves

In his ‘Our relationship with ourselves’, Schopenhauer further explores his general rules and puts them into practice. For example, he tells us that limitation contributes to happiness. The less the Will is excited, the less we suffer. Concentrate on living in the present. Try to make the present time as painless as possible and enjoy it. Use the one thing you can control, your mind, to guide you.

*‘We must set limits to our wishes, curb our desires, moderate our anger, always remembering that an individual can attain only an infinitesimal share in anything that is worth having; and that, on the other hand, everyone must incur many of the ills of life (...) and if we fail to observe this rule, no position of wealth or power will prevent us from feeling wretched’* (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 46).

Especially noteworthy is his idea that happiness can only be found in solitude. The adaptation needed to be around with other people robs you of being yourself; and the company of other people offers no compensation for this loss. Related to pessimism is also his advice to accept your misfortunes, and only to think about them if you are partly responsible for them. Try not to worry about all the things that can go wrong. It is no use building castles in the air.

Schopenhauer advises us to look back on our lives from time to time, because we can learn from it; to fight envy for it contributes to unhappiness; to find a proper proportion between thoughts about the past, the present and the future; to think before acting, but not to waste any time afterwards by rethinking the path we have chosen; to consider what we have instead of what we lack; to concentrate on mental (intellectual) work; to keep busy; to avoid being led by phantoms of our imagination; to use reason to control our thoughts; and to take good care of our health.

#### 5.3.2.3 Our relationship with others

In his advice on how to deal with other people in our lives, Schopenhauer’s pessimism and personal experiences take a lead. Schopenhauer thinks being together with other people is in most cases a terrible ordeal. His view of people in general is very bleak. People are dumb, selfish, out to harm you and can therefore never be

trusted. Being around with others is dangerous, so one has to be careful und cunning to avoid being hurt.<sup>12</sup>

His recommendations for dealing with other people fall into two categories. The first fosters acceptance of imperfection, the second is plainly pessimistic about the possibility of having satisfying relationships. A few examples:

- People are essentially only interested in themselves. Therefore, they are both easily offended and flattered. People's opinions and judgements are usually corrupt and easily bought.
- Being friendly and kind to other people will make them arrogant and intolerable. Never let yourself become dependent on someone. Always behave with a little disregard.
- Friendship is usually concealed self-interest.
- True friendship is extremely rare. Maybe it does not exist at all.
- Exhibiting intelligence and discernment makes you very unpopular because it confronts other people with their intellectual inferiority.
- Trust is often a sign of laziness, selfishness and vanity.
- Extraordinary people find ordinary people very annoying and will prefer solitude.

This negative attitude about other people is softened by his advice that deals with acceptance. Schopenhauer tells his readers to accept people for what they are. They cannot change themselves and neither can you. Accepting the fact that there are many fools in the world will save you a lot of conflict. Do not despair when wrong statements, for instance in books, are made. Be patient; the truth will come out in the end.

#### *5.4 Reality value of the advice*

Schopenhauer based his advice on his philosophy and personal experience in 19th century Germany. How well does it fit the situation of the average citizen today? We can check by comparing his recommendations with the empirical research findings on conditions for happiness in modern society. For instance, if Schopenhauer is right that one can better keep away from people, empirical studies would show loners to be happier than people who socialize. Below we consider the reality value of his recommendations one by one. For each we check whether there is corresponding

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<sup>12</sup> The way Schopenhauer describes other people says a lot about him. It seems he had what we may call a superiority complex, which means that you have an exaggerated striving for superiority to compensate for deep feelings of inferiority. Schopenhauer's inability to adapt himself to the outside world made him hate and despise other people. This might have to do with the unloving family he grew up in and the attachment to his mother (cf. Hitschmann, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1992, pp. 290 and 311–313).

empirical research and to what extent the available findings fit the advice. We draw on a large body of empirical research on happiness. The abundance is such that we cannot separately cite all the studies we used. Instead, we used the empirical findings that are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (WDH) (Veenhoven, 2006). We will note the section in the WDH where these data can be found, in particular the relevant sections of the 'Catalogue of Correlational Findings', which can be browsed on the web. (<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>). We also used the narrative reviews by Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) and Veenhoven (1997) and the book *Understanding Happiness* by Headey and Wearing (1992).

#### 5.4.1 Do not seek wealth

Schopenhauer writes that a lot of money does not make one very happy. Everybody needs a basic income to be able to survive, but after that, wealth is very relative. This view is corroborated in the findings of contemporary empirical research. The many correlational studies listed in the WDH (findings on 'Income') typically show little relationship between objective income and happiness in affluent nations. Satisfaction with income is more strongly related to happiness than actual income. Schopenhauer is right when he states that satisfaction with income is more a matter of interpretation than of objective circumstances.

#### 5.4.2 Do not seek status

Schopenhauer sees social status as fundamentally unimportant, but acknowledges that it is difficult to accept that people do not respect you. This view is not wholly supported by contemporary research findings. Many studies have found positive correlations between happiness and indicators of social prestige—in particular with occupational prestige, managers and professionals being typically happier than clerks and unskilled labourers (WDH, findings on 'Occupation'). Satisfaction with perceived popularity is more strongly related with happiness than actual socio-metrical popularity (WDH, findings on 'Popularity').

Schopenhauer's own life illustrates the importance of fame. He was said to have been quite happy after the success of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, because he was finally as popular as he thought he should be. He died, relatively satisfied, at the ripe age of 72.

#### 5.4.3 Personality is crucial

Schopenhauer declares that a person's character is the basis for a relatively happy life. Other circumstances are less important. Our lives are destined by luck and the characteristics with which we are born. Schopenhauer therefore advises us to seek happiness in ourselves.

Many empirical investigations on happiness consider its relationship to personality. The results of much of this research are stored in the WDH (findings on 'Current personality'), and the correlations are typically strong. Diener et al. (1999) describe personality as 'one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well

being', although the complicated interaction between personality, life events, coping strategy and circumstances of the environment has not been explored in full. Schopenhauer's emphasis on the characteristics with which we are born is also justified. Happiness is partly dependent on inheritance and has trait-like properties (Diener et al., 1999), although the actual circumstances of life are important as well (Headey & Wearing, 1992; Veenhoven, 1994).

#### 5.4.4 What kind of personality makes you happy?

Extraversion enhances well being, because of the greater sensitivity to rewards and by seeking more pleasant social interactions. Optimism stimulates happiness by generalized positive expectancies of the future and the related thought that outcomes in the future are under personal control. Neuroticism lowers well being by its focus on the negative aspects of the world (Diener et al., 1999). This is almost the exact opposite of what Schopenhauer proposes to his readers.

A defender of Schopenhauerian pessimism can ask what the relevance is of the differences of opinion about personality. As stated, personality is largely inheritable, and in a happiness enhancing self-help book it is not as important to be right about the happy personality traits, as it is to give solid advice on changing the interaction with the environment. It can even be said that Schopenhauer offers solace to people without happiness-enhancing personality traits. He warns that negative affect has nothing to do with personal inferiority, but is a logical consequence of the state of the world. This stimulates acceptance and may serve as an antidote to negative rumination.

However, the position of Schopenhauer on personality is problematic in a self-help book, because personality also influences the interaction with the (social) environment. Schopenhauer tells his readers not to try to solve problems in the interaction with others, but to avoid them altogether and to use emotion-focused coping for the remaining negative affect.

Headey and Wearing's (1992) analysis of the interaction patterns of different personality types yield a different conclusion. They found that certain types of personality encounter certain types of events in their lives. The same people keep telling us that they made new friends, that a friendship with someone of the opposite sex became closer, that they got promoted at work, or were sacked. Harmony or fights in the family also tend to be recurring experiences. Headey and Wearing use the personality traits extraversion and neuroticism (emotional (in)stability) to explain the differences in types of events people encounter. Headey and Wearing distinguish between positive and negative life events and between well being and psychological distress. Table 1 gives an overview.

The phlegmatic type rates low on well being and low on psychological distress. These people lead a rather monochrome life. The sanguine type rates high on well being and low on psychological distress. They lead a rather happy and social life, without worrying too much. The choleric type has both high levels of well being but also of psychological distress. The melancholic type rates low on well being and high on psychological distress. According to Headey and Wearing, people experience a

personal dynamic equilibrium in patterns of life events. This means that people’s lives are strongly influenced by their personality and will in time return to the pattern of events that is typical for their personality type. History will repeat itself.

**Table 1** Personality

|           | Stable  | Neurotic  |
|-----------|---|---|
| Introvert | <b>I Phlegmatic:</b><br>Passive, careful, thoughtful, peaceful, controlled, reliable, even-tempered, calm   | <b>II Melancholic:</b><br>Quiet, pessimistic, unsociable, sober, rigid, moody, anxious, reserved          |
|           | <b>III Sanguine:</b><br>Sociable, outgoing, talkative, responsive, easygoing, lively, carefree, leader like | <b>IV Choleric:</b><br>Active, optimistic, impulsive, changeable, excitable, aggressive, restless, touchy |

Adapted from Headey and Wearing (1992)

Headey and Wearing (1992, pp. 172–192) also offer advice on how to increase our chances of happiness. Since social interaction is one of the more important satisfiers, one of the possibilities is to learn the social skills that extrovert and stable people have naturally. It is also important to find some kind of meaning or purpose in life. In general it might help to explore fully the activities one likes to do best. Headey and Wearing tell their readers to enthusiastically seek interaction with the environment, and not to limit themselves to emotion-focused coping. This is the opposite of what you would do if you were to follow Schopenhauer’s self-help book.

A weakness in their argument is that they base their advice for the people low on well being on the behaviours that work well for the people with other personality traits, whereas Schopenhauer strongly emphasizes that personality is given. Can the advice to change the interaction with the environment be counterproductive, as it requires from people that they change something that is outside their control, their personalities? We were unable to find intervention studies that enable us to answer this question directly, but a secondary analysis of the Australian Panel Study allowed us to test if the benefits of intimate social ties had equally strong positive effects for different personality types (see below).



#### 5.4.5 Avoid problems

In Schopenhauer's general rules, the emphasis lies on finding freedom from pain and being satisfied with little. This advice is unfortunate for two reasons. The first is that absence of distress is not sufficient to warrant happiness. We have described above that phlegmatic people are low on distress and low on well being. Also, choleric people are high on distress, but high on well being as well. It can be concluded that happiness is a more positive state than the mere absence of pain.

The second reason is that emotion-focused coping keeps people from actively pursuing the goals in life they find important. Schopenhauer tells them not to try too much, because in the end nothing lasts. Research, however, shows that having goals can add structure and meaning to daily life and that progress towards goals can produce high well being (Diener et al., 1999). Reaching a certain goal makes people feel more in control of their lives and increases feelings of self-worth (Baumeister, 1991, pp. 119–127). Happy people are usually active, outgoing, concerned in the world and involved in the lives of other people (Veenhoven, 1988).

#### 5.4.6 Do not be optimistic

We mentioned above that optimism is correlated with higher well being, and it is worthwhile to go deeper into this subject, because Schopenhauer believed that superficial optimism would render people vulnerable to depression. He advised people not to be too optimistic, because the worst is yet to come. Research however shows that optimism is also a positive trait in challenging circumstances. It helps people to see the negative in perspective: by seeing the future as enjoyable, you are more likely to see negative events as temporary. Optimism gives people the strength to deal with the negative, because it helps people to focus on aspects of a given situation that are within their personal control, so they can make the best of adversities. Optimism correlates positively with well being (Scheier et al., 2001).

Pessimism however is not always bad. Norem (2001) explains that defensive pessimism (the cognitive strategy where individuals set low expectations for an upcoming performance, despite having done well in the past) helps people high on anxiety to prepare for challenges. People using this strategy usually perform well. They realize what a bad performance can mean for them and this inspires them to put effort into the preparation. By expecting the worst they curb anxiety about failures. In these circumstances the low expectations are not self-fulfilling. Unrealistic optimism can lead to risk behaviour and quitting when things turn out to be more difficult than expected. People need enough optimism to start something new and enough pessimism to see that the road ahead might be difficult.

Schopenhauer's position has some characteristics that can be thought of as a form of defensive pessimism. His message is that no matter how terrible our ordeal is, we must try and make the best of it. We should never give up, and should never let our misfortune get to us. He also makes it easier to accept misfortunes by helping people to acknowledge that they are only partly to blame for them. After all, we must realize that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Try to face the negative aspects of life

bravely, and concentrate on what you have instead of what you lack: this is also a form of advice that is almost optimistic. The same is true for his idea that we should not hesitate to spend time or money to avoid misfortunes.

Schopenhauer's pessimism is not absolute and he avoids important pitfalls of pessimism (suppression of thoughts, giving up, self-distraction, cognitive avoidance, focus on distress and overt denial), but this does not mean that he uses his pessimism constructively. His idea is that we can teach ourselves to adapt to a miserable world by changing our reactions to it and to enjoy Byron's 'solitude of kings', but he forgets that it often works out better to try to change the world according to our needs and wants. Not all people are awful and we can even find some friends and a partner of our liking. Our well being is greatly served by it.

#### 5.4.7 Shun people

According to Schopenhauer people and friendship should not be trusted and especially the talented should prefer loneliness. The empirical findings indicate that this is not correct. A positive attitude towards social interaction and friendship shows a positive correlation with happiness and so does the number of visits of relatives, the number of friends, the number of close friends, the attendance at parties, the amount of intimate discussions and social participation (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and 'Friendship', 'Family' and 'Social involvement').

#### 5.4.8 Do not marry

In Schopenhauer's view, marriage has been created by women to make sure that men take care of them financially, and is something that would make men unhappy. This idea is not supported by contemporary data.<sup>13</sup> In fact, being married is good for the well being of both men and women, but the correlations are even higher for men (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and 'Marital status'). It seems that women are more able to form social networks that buffer the loneliness of being single. Below we will see that marriage is especially profitable for neurotics.

#### 5.4.9 Remain yourself

Schopenhauer warns his readers about the dangers of conformism. You can better be yourself and not pay too much attention to the opinions of others. The existing findings on this subject are mixed. There is a positive correlation between happiness and being courteous, cooperative, tactful, conscientiousness, trustworthy and seeking social approval, which seems to indicate that compliance with a group raises happiness. On the other hand happy people appear to be less conforming, more independent, less

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<sup>13</sup> Note that the concept of marriage has changed over time. It is impossible to say what Schopenhauer might have said about the modern idea of marriage in the Western world in which women are far less dependent financially on men than in Schopenhauer's days.

inhibited and less inclined to feel guilty (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and ‘Personality’).

The advice of Schopenhauer may have been too extreme in his emphasis on self-determination, but his emphasis on internal motivation instead of giving in to societal pressures, is probably conducive to happiness. Internal motivation goes with more interest, excitement and confidence, which explains enhanced performance, persistence and creativity and heightened vitality, self-esteem and happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### *5.5 Applicability for neurotic people*

The foregoing section casts doubt about Schopenhauer’s advice, since most of his recommendations appear to lead to conditions that work out negatively with regard to happiness. Yet our assessment of reality consequences was largely based on investigations among the general population. Possibly, the recommendations work out differently for different people, and it is not far-fetched to think that the advice could work out positively for people like Schopenhauer.

As noted earlier, Schopenhauer seems to have been an introvert, to have had trouble making and keeping friends, to have been lonely, thoughtful and emotionally unstable (anxious, nervous). This makes him a melancholic personality. His characteristics should then be, according to Eysenck, quiet, pessimistic, unsociable, sober, rigid, moody, anxious and reserved (Carver & Scheier, 1992, pp. 68–69). This seems to fit the description of Schopenhauer very well. Actually, Schopenhauer (1995, p. 23) himself refers to this personality type: ‘A genius is one whose nervous power or sensitiveness is largely in excess; as Aristotle has very correctly observed. Men distinguished in philosophy, politics, poetry or art, appear to be all of a melancholy temperament’.

Headey and Wearing (1992, p. 121) found that people with this kind of personality, ‘rate low on well being and high on psychological distress. They have poor social networks. They feel relatively helpless, vulnerable and unable to control their lives. They worry a lot. There are relatively large gaps between their expectations and their perceptions of their current life’. Schopenhauer fits this picture very well. Schopenhauer was also wrong on the subject of marriage for neurotic people.

Would Arthur’s advice be apt for this kind of person? Are neurotics like him better off if they cultivate their misanthropy, avoid social contacts and forego marriage? We cannot answer these questions with research papers, because positive psychology has almost nothing to say about the fit between advice offered about personality characteristics (Norem & Chang, 2002), but we checked the latter hypothesis in a secondary analysis of the Victoria Quality of Life Panel Study by Headey and Wearing. We investigated if the effects of marriage for melancholic people are as strong as for people with sanguine, phlegmatic and choleric personalities. If the objection to Headey and Wearing’s advice is right, then people high on neuroticism and low on extraversion have a personality that is least likely to profit from advice that tells them to copy the behaviour of happy extraverts.

The data strongly suggest that intimate personal relationships add to well being, especially for people high on neuroticism and low on extraversion. The correlation between happiness and marriage is even higher for neurotic people (+0.79), than for the other personality types (+0.51). The correlations are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Average happiness for people with and without partners for different personality types

|                     | No partner |      |     | With partner |      |     | Difference<br>(profit) |
|---------------------|------------|------|-----|--------------|------|-----|------------------------|
|                     | Happiness  |      |     | Happiness    |      |     |                        |
|                     | Mean       | SD   | N   | Mean         | SD   | N   |                        |
| Neurotics           | 6.10       | 1.10 | 85  | 6.89         | 1.31 | 140 | +0.79                  |
| Other personalities | 6.81       | 1.08 | 214 | 7.32         | 1.06 | 473 | +0.51                  |

## 5.6 Discussion

In this article, we assessed the reality value of Schopenhauer's recommendations for a happier life by comparing them with contemporary research findings on the conditions for happiness. Is such a comparison appropriate? At first sight there are reasons to doubt it.

First, one could object that the paradigms are too different, since Schopenhauer was a philosopher, while contemporary research is done by social scientists. We do not consider this to be a problem, as the social sciences did not exist in Schopenhauer's time and have evolved from philosophy. The questions asked are similar. Furthermore, the particular book by Schopenhauer we are considering is not a straightforward philosophical book, but a practical guide.

It is more difficult to judge whether Schopenhauer's book was meant for our age, or can only be understood in the light of its time. Did Schopenhauer consider his work as universal and timeless? His book is still very readable, but some of his remarks, for example on honour, have little bearing on our times. Other values are more implicit and consequently more difficult to understand. Some concepts deserve extra attention, such as Schopenhauer's view on marriage. Marriage was a different institution during Schopenhauer's era. His advice, which was predominantly aimed at men, was to refrain from marrying, for in his times women depended on marriage for their income. Even if it is sound advice now—according to recent data—to marry, it may be that this was different in his times. It may be that the concept of marriage has changed too much over time to make Schopenhauer's advice applicable.

Schopenhauer himself, however, in his introduction answers the question whether his philosophy was intended to be. He constantly quotes other writers and philosophers from as much as 2000 years before him. According to Schopenhauer, the wise have, said the same throughout the ages, and the fools have said the complete opposite. Therefore, we conclude that Schopenhauer considered his statements to be timeless, although we may not agree with him about this.

Another question we have to ask is: Are Schopenhauer and contemporary researchers concerned with the same thing? Note that we use a modern definition of happiness as the subjective appreciation of life as a whole. There are some differences between Schopenhauer's definition of happiness and the one we now use. Schopenhauer's original definition is more hedonistic: he defines happiness as the complete absence of all pain and the complete fulfilment of all desires. However, as this is—according to him—an unattainable state, his advice is meant to enhance durable life-satisfaction. This comes very close to a modern definition of happiness as the subjective appreciation of life as a whole. Schopenhauer's book is partly a literature study on what other writers and philosophers have said on the subject, but he only uses quotes that mesh in with his views. In a sense, his book is empirical, but exclusively based on his personal findings in life. Contemporary research is empirical and based on other people's own perceptions of their happiness.

### *5.7 Conclusion*

Schopenhauer wrote one of the first self-help books. It gives the reader advice on how to make life bearable. Some of his remarks are very apt. For instance he advises the reader to restrain from striving for wealth; and contemporary data shows that once a basic income is achieved, more money does little to increase happiness. He also advises us to stay busy, which is a valid suggestion. Schopenhauer rightly observed that a person's character is a key determinant of happiness. Ironically, he did not realize the strong interaction between his own personality and his view on happiness. His gloomy view on human interaction dominates his advice about happiness. Contemporary data prove Schopenhauer wrong in these remarks on social interaction. Social interaction is a key determinant for happiness. His advice to shy away from people and to distrust others is probably the worst advice for anyone to follow. The book is amusing and well written, but it would be a mistake to follow all of its recommendations. Schopenhauer did not succeed in using his pessimistic world-view constructively for creating happiness enhancing advice. Misanthropy and social isolation will make you unhappy, even when you are someone with a neurotic personality like Schopenhauer.

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## The advice of the wise

### Afterthoughts about reality checking

#### Summary

*One of the aims of this special issue on happiness advice was to assess the reality value of recommendations. All papers checked empirical indications for effectiveness, typically by inspecting whether the things advised have been found to be related to happiness in empirical research. Some limitations of this approach are that some advisers used a different definition of happiness than the papers, the papers checked the advice for present day readers, not for the contemporaries of advisers, the data that is used to check the advice is most often correlative in nature, and the papers ignored personality differences. Future research should focus on a wider range of happiness advisers, look at the interaction of the advice and individual readers and address the question of the usefulness of the advice experimentally.*

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One of the central questions considered in this special issue is whether happiness advice enhances in happiness of people who take it to heart. In each case study we checked whether the recommendations are in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness. Does this test do justice to the wise advisers? The following limitations must be acknowledged.

### *6.1 Same notion of happiness?*

The evidence check is based on what we know about happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. However, the advice considered is sometimes based on another concept of happiness or even multiple and ill-defined views on the good life. Philosophers typically equate the good life with a life that meets moral tenets. One could argue that it would be better to judge whether the advice would inspire people to behave more kindly towards their fellow human beings, since this may have been what the advisor wanted to accomplish.

Yet, the moral view on happiness is usually accompanied by the implicit promise that living up to moral standards will make life more enjoyable and a lot of readers seem to pick up this suggestion. Hence it still makes sense to investigate whether this advice is likely to produce this result.

### *6.2 Comparable conditions?*

A second reason to question the fairness of our procedure is that some papers have judged old advice applied to modern circumstances. We use data from modern happiness research as a standard for Epicurus, Schopenhauer and the classic Chinese philosophers, but they gave their advice in social circumstances that were quite, or very, different from those of modern day industrialized nations. We investigated the utility of the advice for modern readers. We cannot do the same for contemporaries of these philosophers, because data is lacking for people from those times. Despite this, a lot of readers see eternal wisdom in these advisory texts and in this context it is not wrong to test their applicability to modern conditions.

### *6.3 Data limitations*

A third reason to question our results has to do with the limitations of the data. There is a large body of correlational data about happiness, but still our understanding of the individual dynamics of happiness and human thriving is limited (e.g. Seligman, & Csikszentmihaly, 2000; Diener, 2000). and hence we cannot check the appropriateness of all the advice.

### *6.4 Use of the advice*

Another limitation is that we discuss the effects for average people who would take the advice to heart. In real life the interaction between the wise and their followers is more dynamic. Consider the following thought experiments.

In his book *There is a spiritual solution to every problem* self-help guru Wayne Dyer (2003) tells his readers how he had to endure a heart attack. For 24 h he was anxious and tense, but then he decided to become happy again. He joked with his nurses and cardiologist and told his wife he loved her during treatment. The great pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer (1995/1890) defended a radically different view on life. According to him happiness is not possible and the highest aim is to free yourself from pain and to make life bearable. Schalkx, & Bergsma (2008) show that it is likely that a reader who follows Schopenhauer's advice will lose happiness.

Now for argument's sake, let us assume that Dyer is an enlightened adviser and offers a key to remaining happy in all bad circumstances. If so, we are still unable to conclude that everybody would profit by reading Dyer's book and would be harmed by Schopenhauer's book. Readers will not always take the advice literally, but will also compare themselves socially with the authors. Just as a comparison with Einstein might make you feel humble and might make you perform less well intellectually, a comparison with Dyer might make you feel inadequate by contrast (Stapel, & Winkielman, 1998). The chances are that a minor row with your partner will upset you more than the heart attack upset Dyer; and you may decide that the marvelous spiritual solutions are not available for you because you lack character.

Schopenhauer's neurotic advice may give you the impression that you are better off than you thought you were and that you have reason to be satisfied with yourself. Reading his *The wisdom of life and counsels and maxims* allows you to make a downward social comparison with a renowned philosopher whose fame was based on his advice for a happy life! Alternatively, Schopenhauer's advice may serve as a warning that you should better control your own pessimistic disposition or otherwise you might become just like the author. Schopenhauer's bad advice may well be more happiness enhancing for some readers than good advice from Dyer.

### 6.5 Diverse readership

Another limitation of the evidence tests in this issue is that they ignore personality differences. Effects of advice will in part depend on the personality of the people who want to follow it. (See Bergsma, 2008, for a more elaborate discussion). There are many different ways, in which to become happy; and some personality traits will influence, which options are best for a given individual. A one-size-fits-all approach is implicated in any general review of happiness advice for average citizens. The same is true for lifestyle advice to enhance health. A lot of people that adopt healthy habits do so to prevent themselves succumbing to diseases for which they lack vulnerability (e.g. DeRidder, 2008; Austin, 2001). Yet, the happiness advice is typically presented as applicable to everybody and this claim does justify performing a test of general applicability.

## *6.6 Agenda for further research*

This special issue presents a first attempt to check systematically the usefulness of happiness advice. It shows that this approach is feasible in principle but that it is also beset with problems. What are the promising ways to proceed further?

Our first recommendation is to take a broader view on advisory traditions. In this issue we have focused on teachings in the original works, but it would also be worthwhile to inspect how the counsel has changed over time. For example: How have Epicureanism, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism evolved since the original ideas were ventured? This change in recommendations may shed light on the applicability of the counsel in the context of socio-cultural changes.

Some recommendation themes can be studied in greater detail, for example specific best-selling self-help books with a spiritual or psychological background. Future research should also look at case studies different from those that were chosen for this special issue: there are many influential advisers available we had to ignore. There is no reason to stick to explicit happiness advice presented in the mass media. What is the implicit advice given in literature, movies or consulting-rooms of physicians and psychotherapists? And what are the effects of the lifestyles and mental attitudes that are favored by the great religions?

An important addition to the studies presented would be to focus on the interaction between the advice and the person that listens to it. It is a gross simplification to think that people listen to advice and then ‘just do it’. Listeners are much more active than this. For example, it may not be that serious if one author offers a limited view on happiness, if his or her audience will also listen to other advisers. It would be very interesting to know more about the way people use the advice in daily living and how they choose to follow one lead and to ignore another.

A last theme for future research is to test the effects of the advice empirically. A start already has been made by testing bibliotherapy for psychological disorders. Bibliotherapy appears to be as effective as individual or group psychotherapy under certain conditions (Bergsma, 2008). Is this effect exclusive for a therapy program or does the same happen with growth oriented happiness advice? Empirical studies will make it possible to determine those for whom happiness advice works and for whom it does not. For example, one could ask different groups of students to read the classical Chinese philosophical texts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Happiness research suggests that these classical texts may be expected to have different effects on the happiness of the readers of these texts. Confucianism may be expected to be happiness enhancing for those who allow themselves to be influenced by the classic texts, and classic Buddhism happiness might be expected to be happiness reducing (Guoqing and Veenhoven, 2008). If this effect does not occur, we should ask ourselves whether the state of happiness research is such that we are able to make a distinction between good and bad happiness advice. Do we have enough data and insight to reach out to the general audience?

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## **Deel 2**

### **Psychische stoornissen en geluk**

## **Most people with mental disorders are happy**

### ***A 3-year follow-up in the Dutch general population***

#### **Summary**

*Three questions are addressed: 1) How (un)happy are people with and without mental disorders? 2) What are the clinical characteristics associated with happiness among people with a mental disorder? 3) Does happiness predict recovery from mental disorders? A representative sample (N = 7076) of the Dutch population was interviewed at baseline and one and three years later. Mental disorders were assessed using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview. Happiness was measured using a single question on how often respondents had felt happy during the last four weeks. Of the respondents with a mental disorder 68.4% reported they had felt often happy, compared to 89.1% without a disorder. The unhappiness of people with mental disorders is associated with having a mood disorder and impaired emotional and social role functioning. Happiness enhances the changes of recovery from a mental disorder at follow-up. The implications are discussed.*

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## *7.1 Introduction*

The main reason why we speak about mental disorders, is the suffering involved (APA, 1994). It therefore seems logical that people with mental disorders experience lower levels of happiness than people without disorders. This may be seen as so obvious that happiness is a neglected issue in mental health research. There are probably two main reasons for this neglect.

The first has to do with a tendency in research to focus on the negative aspects of functioning, while ignoring the positive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The new 'positive psychology' movement aims to correct this bias. There is good evidence that happiness has a positive influence on health and a host of other aspects of functioning (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005, Frederickson 2001). Positive emotions can be used to bounce back from negative experiences and emotions (Tugade et al., 2004; Frederickson et al., 2003) and therefore they are relevant for people with mental disorders.

A second reason is that well-being and ill-being have often been viewed as the mirror images of the same dimension, but positive and negative affect may be partly independent of the other (Ryff et al., 2006; Schreffin & Nelson, 2010). High levels of distress can go together with high subjective well-being (Headey & Wearing, 1992; Schimmack et al., 2004). This means that our knowledge of mental disorders is incomplete if we only look at the negative side of the spectrum. The current study aims to broaden the view on positive functioning and human strengths in the context of mental disorders.

## *7.2 Research questions*

In this paper we address 3 questions: The first question relates to the size of the burden of mental disorder in terms of unhappiness. How (un)happy are people with mental disorders? We expect that they will be less happy than people without mental disorders, but do not know to what extent.

The second question deals with what kind of mental disorders are most detrimental to happiness. We were unable to find existing studies and expected that mood disorders would be most detrimental to happiness and that people can live fairly well with other mental disorders, in particular with less serious disorders such as a single phobia, that do not interfere too much with role functioning. We assessed whether it is the disorder itself that makes people unhappy, or the reduced functioning that goes with it.

The third question deals with whether happy moods influence the course of mental disorders. Happiness appears to foster physical health (Veenhoven, 2008) and we expected that the same will be true for mental health.

## *7.3 Method*

### *7.3.1 Participants*



The Netherlands Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study (NEMESIS) is a study on the prevalence, incidence, course and outcome of psychiatric disorders in a representative sample (N = 7076) of the general population aged 18-64 (Bijl, Van Zessen et al, 1998). The study is based on a sample of 90 Dutch municipalities, with the stratification criteria urban residence and adequate distribution over the 12 Dutch provinces. The second step was to draw a sample of private households from post office registers. The number of households selected in each municipality was determined by its population size.

The selected households were sent a letter of introduction signed by the national minister of public health asking them to take part. Shortly thereafter they were contacted by telephone by the interviewers. Households with no telephone or unlisted numbers (18%) were visited in person. In each household, the member with the most recent birthday was selected, on the condition that (s)he was between 18 and 64 years and sufficiently fluent in Dutch to be interviewed. Persons who were not immediately available, due to travel, hospitalization or imprisonment, were contacted later. To establish contact, the interviewers made a minimum of ten phone calls or visits to a given address at different times of the day and week. These procedures were approved by the ethics committee of the Netherlands Institute of Mental Health and Addiction.

In the initial data collection phase, from February through December 1996, 7076 persons were interviewed (T0). The response rate was 69.7%. The participants in the survey reflected well the Dutch population in terms of gender, civil status and urban residence. The 18-24 age group was underrepresented (Bijl, Van Zessen et al, 1998).

All participants in the baseline interview were approached for the follow-up. As at T0, if necessary the interviewers made at least ten phone calls or visits at various times of the day and week. Of the 7076 persons who had taken part at T0, 5618 were interviewed twelve months later at T1 (response 79.4%) and of these 4796 subjects were interviewed two years later at T2 (response 85.4%) (De Graaf et al, 2000).

### 7.3.2 Mental disorder

The Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI), Version 1.1 (computerized version) (Robins et al, 1988) was used to determine mental disorders. The CIDI is a structured interview that was developed by the World Health Organization (Wittchen et al, 1991) and is based on the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS) and the Present State Examination (PSE). It is designed for use by trained interviewers who are not clinicians. CIDI 1.1 contains two diagnostic programs to compute diagnoses according to the criteria and definitions of either DSM-III-R or ICD-10. The CIDI is now being used worldwide, and WHO field trials have documented acceptable reliability and validity (Semler et al., 1987; Wacker et al., 1990; Farmer et al., 1991; Wittchen et al., 1989; Brown et al., 1994). The following DSM-III-R diagnoses are recorded in NEMESIS: mood disorders (depression, dysthymia, bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders (panic disorder, agoraphobia, simple phobia, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder) psychoactive substance use disorders (alcohol or drug abuse and dependence, including

sedatives, hypnotics and anxiolytics), eating disorders, schizophrenia and other non-affective psychotic disorders. In our analysis we used the 1-month prevalence of disorders. The people without a disorder had no current disorder, but may have had a history of mental disorder.

### 7.3.3 Happiness

Happiness was measured using a single question taken from the Short-Form-36 Health Survey (SF-36) (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992; Ware et al., 1997) about the frequency of happy moods during the past four weeks. The scale ranged from 1 = never felt happy, 2 = rarely felt happy, 3 = sometimes felt happy, 4 = often felt happy, 5 = usually felt happy, until 6 = always felt happy.

### 7.3.4 Socio-demographic variables

We included age, gender, educational attainment, cohabitation status; living with a partner or not, irrespective of children, employment status; in paid employment or not, and degree of urban living (rural = municipalities with fewer than 500 addresses per square kilometer; urban = larger municipalities).

### 7.3.5 Role functioning

Role functioning was assessed using sub-scales of the SF-36, a health questionnaire. The reliability and validity of this instrument has been demonstrated (McHorney et al., 1993; McHorney et al., 1994; Burke et al., 1995; Aaronson et al., 1998). The scoring was performed in accordance with the guidelines of Ware & Sherbourne (1992). We used the scales emotional (3 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ), social (2 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ ) and physical role functioning (4 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### 7.3.6 Analyses

The first research question about the (un)happiness of people with and without a mental disorder was addressed by using descriptive analyses, that is, comparison of the average happiness in both groups (table 1). The second research question about the clinical characteristics that are associated with less happiness was addressed using linear regression analysis, with happiness as a dependent variable and clinical and social demographic characteristics as possible confounders (table 2). The third research question about happiness and recovery from mental disorders was addressed using logistic regression analyses (table 3). We focused on people with mental disorders during our first measurement, used happiness at first measurement as independent variable and demographic and clinical characteristics as possible confounders. The dependent variable was the course of illness that was assessed in terms of presence or absence of any mental disorder during follow-up.

The data were weighted to ensure they were representative of the Dutch national population. Robust standard errors were calculated using the first-order Taylor-series linearization method, as implemented in the STATA 9.1 program, to obtain correct 95 percent confidence intervals and p-values.

## 7.4 Results

### 7.4.1 How( un)happy are people with and without mental disorders?

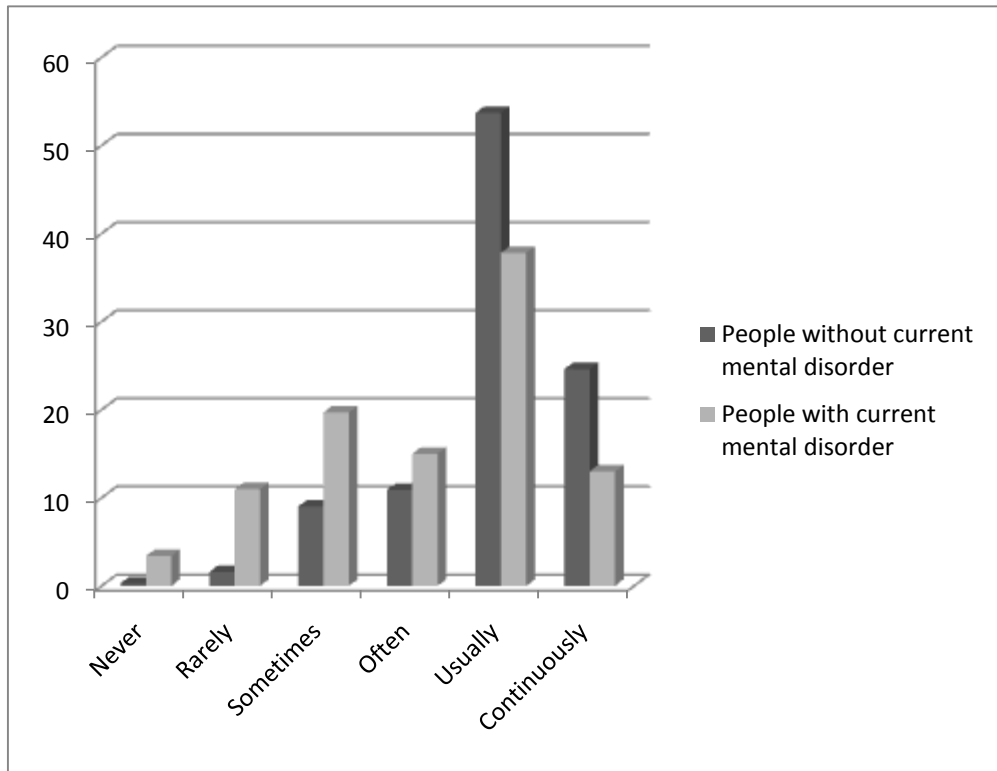
In our sample more than four out of ten (41.2 %) people reported a lifetime prevalence of at least one DSM-III-R disorder at T0. The prevalence of mental disorders during the past month dropped to 16.5 % (Bijl, Ravelli & Van Zessen, 1998). As expected, people diagnosed as having a mental disorder reported less happiness than those without a disorder. People without any disorders reported an average happiness of 4.93, and people with any mental disorder 4.20. The association between 1-month mental disorder and feelings of happiness adjusted for socio-demographic characteristics in adjusted coefficient (b) is -0.67 (95% CI -0.75 – -0.59)

**Table 1** Average happiness for different 1-month mental disorders (N=7,076), in numbers, weighted means and 95% confidence intervals (CI).

|                                   | Feelings of happiness |                    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
|                                   | N                     | mean (95% CI)      |
| No mental disorder                | 5,938                 | 4.93 (4.90 – 4.95) |
| Any mental disorder               | 1,138                 | 4.20 (4.12 – 4.28) |
| <b>Any mood disorder</b>          | 294                   | 3.14 (2.98 – 3.30) |
| Major depression                  | 193                   | 2.97 (2.77 – 3.18) |
| Dysthymia                         | 134                   | 3.08 (2.84 – 3.32) |
| Bipolar disorder                  | 44                    | 3.53 (3.15 – 3.92) |
| <b>Any anxiety disorder</b>       | 711                   | 4.13 (4.02 – 4.23) |
| Panic disorder                    | 108                   | 3.33 (3.05 – 3.61) |
| Agoraphobia                       | 79                    | 3.90 (3.55 – 4.24) |
| Social phobia                     | 275                   | 3.90 (3.73 – 4.07) |
| Simple phobia                     | 408                   | 4.32 (4.19 – 4.46) |
| Generalised anxiety disorder      | 58                    | 3.65 (3.27 – 4.03) |
| Obsessive compulsive disorder     | 20                    | 2.93 (2.32 – 3.54) |
| <b>Any substance use disorder</b> | 342                   | 4.43 (4.30 – 4.56) |
| Alcohol abuse                     | 139                   | 4.79 (4.62 – 4.96) |
| Alcohol dependence                | 166                   | 4.26 (4.06 – 4.45) |
| Drug abuse                        | 15                    | 4.20 (3.67 – 4.73) |
| Drug dependence                   | 41                    | 3.84 (3.38 – 4.29) |
| <b>Number of mental disorders</b> |                       |                    |
| Precisely 1 disorder              | 791                   | 4.48 (4.40 – 4.57) |
| Precisely 2 disorders             | 208                   | 3.78 (3.57 – 3.98) |
| 3 or more disorders               | 139                   | 3.10 (2.86 – 3.34) |

The difference in the changes of having a mental disorder was more pronounced on the negative side of the happiness continuum than on the positive side.

**Figure 1** The weighted frequencies of happy feelings for people with and without one month mental disorders, in percentages.



#### 7.4.1.1 Never or seldom felt happy

84.6 Percent of the people who had never or rarely felt happy during the past four weeks, had, a history of, a mental disorder. We mention lifetime prevalence because psychopathology is associated with the residual functional disability even if a disorder is cured or in remission (Bijl & Ravelli, 2000). The people who had never felt happy in the four weeks prior to the interview had an odd's ratio for having had a mental disorder during the past month of 22.7 (10.9 – 47.2, 95% CI) compared to those who always felt happy.

#### 7.4.1.2 Often or always felt happy

68.4% Of the respondents diagnosed as having a mental disorder reported having felt at least often happy during the four weeks prior to the questioning. This is less than

the 89.1% of the respondents who had not had a mental disorder in the four weeks prior to the interview, but having a mental disorder does mental disorder does not rule out happiness.

7.4.2 What clinical characteristics are associated with happiness?

As expected, the frequency of happy moods correlates with type of disorder (table 1). People with a substance abuse disorder report the highest levels of happiness: 4.43. People with alcohol abuse disorder are almost as happy as people without mental disorders. People with any anxiety disorders report an average happiness of 4.13 and people with a mood disorder reported an average happiness of 3.14. We did not have enough people in our sample with eating disorders, schizophrenia and other non-affective psychotic disorders to report on their happiness.

Disorders that are generally considered as less serious are associated with more happiness. Of the anxiety disorders, simple phobia is associated with most happiness and obsessive compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder are associated with least happiness. Of the mood disorders, dysthymia is associated with more frequent happy moods than major depressive disorder. Substance abuse is associated with more happiness than substance dependence.

Comorbidity as an indicator for the severity of psychopathology was associated with less happiness. People with a pure mental disorder often experienced happy moods, with an average of 4.48. People with two mental disorders reported an average of 3.78 and people with three or more mental disorders reported an average of 3.10.

A multivariate linear regression analyses (table 2) was performed to assess whether it is a mental disorder that makes people less happy, or if other clinical characteristics are also of important. We adjusted for sociodemographical factors and the clinical characteristics of the kind of disorder, comorbidity and social, emotional and physical role functioning.

**Table 2** Correlates of feelings of happiness among people with a mental disorder (N=1,138), in weighted percentages or means, adjusted non-standardised coefficients (b) and 95% confidence intervals (CI). Results of a multiple linear regression analysis.

|                                   |      | Feelings of happiness                          |
|-----------------------------------|------|--|
|                                   | %    | Adjusted coefficient<br>(95% CI) <sup>14</sup> |
| Socio-demographic characteristics |      |  |
| Female (ref.=male)                | 50.8 | 0.06 (-0.09 – 0.21)                            |

<sup>14</sup> Adjusted for all variables in the table

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|                                  |      |                              |
|----------------------------------|------|------------------------------|
| Age (in years)                   |      |                              |
| 18-24                            | 21.2 | <b>0.31 (0.03 – 0.59)</b>    |
| 25-34                            | 25.1 | -0.01 (-0.24 – 0.23)         |
| 35-44                            | 24.5 | -0.11 (-0.35 – 0.13)         |
| 45-54                            | 18.3 | -0.24 (-0.49 – 0.02)         |
| 54-64                            | 10.9 | REF.                         |
| P for trend                      |      | 0.001                        |
| Education                        |      |                              |
| Low                              | 8.7  | REF.                         |
| Low-Middle                       | 42.4 | 0.02 (-0.25 – 0.29)          |
| High-Middle                      | 27.2 | 0.08 (-0.22 – 0.37)          |
| High                             | 21.7 | -0.12 (-0.41 – 0.17)         |
| P for trend                      |      | NS                           |
| Living with partner (ref.=other) | 54.8 | <b>0.49 (0.33 – 0.64)</b>    |
| Paid employment (ref.=other)     | 62.5 | 0.07 (-0.08 – 0.22)          |
| Urbanicity of place of residence |      |                              |
| Very low                         | 12.8 | -0.11 (-0.35 – 0.13)         |
| Low                              | 19.9 | 0.05 (-0.16 – 0.26)          |
| Middle                           | 21.4 | 0.08 (-0.13 – 0.29)          |
| High                             | 21.8 | 0.03 (-0.17 – 0.22)          |
| Very high                        | 24.1 | REF.                         |
| P for trend                      |      | NS                           |
| Clinical characteristics         |      |                              |
| Mood disorder (ref.=no)          | 23.9 | <b>-0.62 (-0.89 – -0.35)</b> |
| Anxiety disorder (ref.=no)       | 58.7 | -0.10 (-0.36 – 0.17)         |
| Substance use disorder (ref.=no) | 35.2 | 0.00 (-0.25 – 0.26)          |
| Number of mental disorders       |      |                              |
| Precisely 1 disorder             | 70.8 | 0.24 (-0.10 – 0.58)          |
| Precisely 2 disorders            | 17.7 | 0.01 (-0.29 – 0.32)          |
| 3 or more disorders              | 11.5 | REF.                         |
| P for trend                      |      | NS                           |

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|                                    |      |                           |
|------------------------------------|------|---------------------------|
| Emotional role functioning (0-100) | 78.9 | <b>0.01 (0.00 – 0.01)</b> |
| Social role functioning (0-100)    | 80.4 | <b>0.01 (0.01 – 0.02)</b> |
| Physical functioning (0-100)       | 77.9 | 0.00 (-0.00 – 0.00)       |

The changes of happiness for people with mental disorders are higher if people do not have a mood disorder, are living with a partner, are young, and indicate better social and emotional role functioning. The influence of comorbidity on happiness can be explained by the factors just mentioned.

#### 7.4.3 Does happiness stimulate recovery from mental disorder?

Happiness can predict the course of illness. For people with a mental disorder at T0 (N=687) the association between feelings of happiness and course of illness, that is whether there is a disorder present at T1 or T2, in a unadjusted coefficient (b) is 0.76 (95 % CI 0.67 – 0.87).

**Table 3** The association between feelings of happiness and course of illness among people with a mental disorder (N=687) adjusted for socio-demographic and clinical characteristics, in adjusted odds ratio's and 95% confidence intervals (CI). Results of a multiple logistic regression analysis.

|                                   | Follow-up assessment:<br>any mental disorder in two-year period |
|-----------------------------------|---|
|                                   | Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)*                                   |
| Feelings of happiness             | 0.95 (0.79 – 1.13)  |
| Socio-demographic characteristics |   |
| Female (ref.=male)                | 1.14 (0.74 – 1.74)  |
| Age (in years)                    |   |
| 18-24                             | <b>4.34 (1.89 – 9.98)</b>                                       |
| 25-34                             | 1.76 (0.93 – 3.33)  |
| 35-44                             | 1.42 (0.77 – 2.62)  |
| 45-54                             | 1.65 (0.87 – 3.14)  |
| 54-64                             | REF.  |
| P for trend                       | 0.002   |

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|                                    |                           |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Education                          |                           |
| Low                                | REF.                      |
| Low-Middle                         | 0.51 (0.25 – 1.05)        |
| High-Middle                        | <b>0.45 (0.21 – 0.99)</b> |
| High                               | 0.47 (0.21 – 1.04)        |
| P for trend                        | NS                        |
| Living with partner (ref.=other)   | 1.05 (0.67 – 1.62)        |
| Paid employment (ref.=other)       | 0.99 (0.64 – 1.54)        |
| Urbanicity of place of residence   |                           |
| Very low                           | 0.71 (0.36 – 1.39)        |
| Low                                | 0.65 (0.37 – 1.17)        |
| Middle                             | 1.00 (0.55 – 1.81)        |
| High                               | 0.70 (0.39 – 1.27)        |
| Very high                          | REF.                      |
| P for trend                        | NS                        |
| Clinical characteristics           |                           |
| Mood disorder (ref.=no)            | 0.65 (0.28 – 1.53)        |
| Anxiety disorder (ref.=no)         | 0.72 (0.32 – 1.64)        |
| Substance use disorder (ref.=no)   | 0.67 (0.29 – 1.53)        |
| Number of mental disorders         |                           |
| Precisely 1 disorder               | <b>0.12 (0.03 – 0.42)</b> |
| Precisely 2 disorders              | <b>0.18 (0.06 – 0.59)</b> |
| 3 or more disorders                | REF.                      |
| P for trend                        | 0.002                     |
| Emotional role functioning (0-100) | <b>0.99 (0.98 – 1.00)</b> |
| Social role functioning (0-100)    | 0.99 (0.98 – 1.00)        |
| Physical functioning (0-100)       | 1.00 (0.99 – 1.00)        |

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\* Adjusted for all variables in the table.

In Table 3, we used a multivariate logistic regression analyses. The changes of recovery are higher for people with less mental disorders, with better emotional role functioning and who are younger. These factors are associated with higher happiness,



and the predictive effect of happiness is no longer significant in this model. Having a middle higher education reduces the changes of recovery, but the trend for education and recovery was not significant.

### *7.5 Caveats*

The strength of this study was that we could measure happiness in a large general population study with subjects with and without mental disorders. There are also some limitations which have to be addressed. The diagnoses were all based on self-reports. Happiness was measured using one single question on how often the respondent had felt happy during the last four weeks. A strength of this measure is its simplicity, but the estimates of the respondents may be inaccurate. This limitation can be overcome using the Experience Sampling Method (Delespaul, 1995).

There is discussion in the literature about the usefulness of self-reports of positive affect in the context of mental disorders with respect to possible distortions (Katschnig et al, 2006). We therefore did additional analyses to check the congruent and ecological validity of our happiness measure and found both to be satisfactory (data is available from the first author). The fact that happiness had predictive validity, because it predicted the changes of mental disorders at follow-up, gives additional support to the idea that our happiness measure is relevant.

### *7.6 Conclusions*

#### *7.6.1 Disorders are associated with less happiness*

People diagnosed as having a mental disorder reported less happiness than people without. Mood disorders make frequent happy moods least likely.

##### *7.6.1.1 Most people with mental disorders are happy*

However, 68.4% of the respondents with a mental disorder in month prior to the interview reported that they often felt happy during that time. This was even true for a significant minority of the people going through a major depressive episode.

##### *7.6.1.2 Mood disorders are most detrimental to happiness*

Average happiness is highest for people with substances abuse disorders. The anxiety disorders are associated with less happiness, and the people with mood disorders a least likely to report frequent feelings happiness, although on average they report to feel happy sometimes. People with an alcohol abuse disorder are just as happy as people without mental disorders.

#### *7.6.2 Happiness predicts recovery*

Happy moods can predict the course of mental disorders. The people with a mental disorder who reported more frequent happy moods were less likely to have a mental disorder at follow-up. This effect could be explained by the clinical characteristics of

the disorder and the demographic characteristics of the people involved. People with better emotional role functioning, less comorbidity, and younger age, have better changes of recovery from mental disorders.

### *7.7 Discussion*

The burden of mental disorders in the form of lost happiness is considerable, but two thirds of people with a 1 -month mental disorder reported having been at least often happy during the four weeks prior to the interview. Our results indicate that high levels of distress do not necessarily exclude happy moods. This indicates that focusing on the symptoms of people with mental disorders gives a one-sided and incomplete assessment of the lives of those involved. This was even true for a significant minority of the people diagnosed as going through a major depressive episode. This raises some doubts about the validity of the diagnoses, but this is outside the scope of this paper (for a discussion see: Horwitz & Wakefield, 2006).

The happiness of people with mental disorders can partly be explained by the clinical characteristics. We think that people with anxiety disorders can sometimes avoid feeling bad, by avoiding situations that cause them to be anxious. The most common substance related disorder, alcohol abuse, is not associated with less happiness for the inflicted individuals. Still, the abuse may be detrimental to happiness on the long run, because alcohol problems may cause mood disorders (Fergusson et al, 2009). Our data hint at this possibility because alcohol dependency is associated with less happiness than alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse may also have dire consequences for relatives, colleagues and friends.

Another explanation for the frequency of happiness among people with mental disorders may be that the conditions of living in The Netherlands are favorable. For example, people with mental disorders can count on an a good health care system, a fair government and they are protected by law. They also live in a democratic and individualistic culture, that enhances general happiness (Veenhoven, 1999). In recent years acceptance of common mental disorders seems to have increased and the stigma attached to such disorders decreased (Schnittker, 2008), which may have raised levels of happiness among people with mental disorders.

The possibility of coexisting happiness and mental disorders is of clinical relevance. If psychotherapists are aware of this possibility, the communication with the patient may improve, as is apparent from a case study by Sandra Buechler (2008). The life of a patient in his mid thirties was hobbled by obsessive rituals. He ended treatment when the rituals still consumed much of his time, but he was satisfied with what was accomplished, much to the surprise of his therapist Buechler. He explained that he felt better, had a better sexual life and that his feelings about the rituals changed. They were still an annoying, but no longer a defining part of his life. He had more fun and could see his strengths and not just his liabilities. A narrow focus on what goes wrong in the lives of client and forgetting what goes well, may limit therapeutic results.

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## Do They Know How Happy They Are?

### On the Value of Self-Rated Happiness of People With a Mental Disorder

#### Summary

*Quality of life is often measured using questions about happiness. This method presumes that respondents are able to judge their life. Research suggest that this is typically the case, but this is not to say that everybody can. In that context one may doubt whether people with a mental disorder can judge their life adequately. Happiness can be rejected as a indicator for quality of life for people with mental disorders, because of affective and cognitive distortions. We therefore checked the validity of happiness and satisfaction measures in the context of mental disorders. Psychiatric diagnoses were determined at baseline and at 12 and 36 months follow-up in a representative sample (N = 7,076) of the Dutch population, using a full Composite International Diagnostic Interview. Respondents indicated how often they had felt happy during the past month and how satisfied they were with their lives in general. The measurements have a satisfactory concurrent, ecological and predictive validity for people with mental disorders. Though the level of happiness is lower among the people with mental disorders, conditions for happiness and contentment appear to be similar.*

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## 8.1 Introduction

Utilitarianism is the philosophy of life that is based on the idea that that we should seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Bentham 1789/1907). On a societal level this idea is gaining momentum. For example, the indicator Gross National Happiness is used as a goal for development in Bhutan. In 1971 the former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck famously stated that ‘Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product’ (Priesner, 1999, 28). In the West, the same idea is propagated by noted scholars such as Kahneman et al. (1997) and Layard (2005). The idea is that happiness could be used to guide government decisions and for example to choose between rising inflation and unemployment or between more money and less airport noise (Loewenstein and Ubel, 2008).

A corner stone of applied utilitarianism is the idea that we can measure happiness in the general population adequately. Several authors defend the position that happiness measures are valid (e.g. Veenhoven, 2009), but there is an aspect in the discussion that has not received adequate attention. For people with mental disorders it is claimed that happiness is not a useful indicator for the quality of life, because their moods tend to reflect altered psychological states and not the objective circumstances of their lives (Katschnig 2006; Katschnig et al. 2006; Atkinson et al. 1997; Gill and Feinstein, 1994). For example, the subjective experience of life is more negative in depression than outsiders consider justified (Kay et al. 1964), and the patients themselves agree with the outsiders once they have recovered from the acute episode of their illness (Morgado et al. 1991). Katschnig et al. (2006) state that mood is distorted in mental disorders by psychopathological fallacies of an affective, cognitive and reality distortion nature.

The distortions mentioned can be relevant for survey research, because mental disorders are common in general population (e.g. Baumeister and Härter, 2007). In the Dutch sample we used for our study, 41.2% of the respondents had a lifetime prevalence of at least one DSM-III-R disorder at T0. For the prevalence of mental disorders during the past month the prevalence was 16.5% (Bijl et al. 1998a).

In addition to this, it has become clear that the severest forms of unhappiness are usually associated with mental disorders. In a Dutch sample 84.6% of the people who had never or rarely felt happy during the past 4 weeks, had (a history of) a mental disorder (Bergsma et al. in press a). Life time prevalence is mentioned, because psychopathology is associated with the residual functional disability even if a disorder is cured or in remission (Bijl and Ravelli 2000).

In this paper we try to assess how serious the psychopathological fallacies are for survey research on happiness. Are the distortions so serious that people with mental disorders are less able to judge their own levels of happiness and satisfaction? Of the three fallacies mentioned, we think that the affective and cognitive are most relevant for survey research in the general population. Reality distortion (psychosis) is quite rare and it is not very likely that people will be recruited for survey research when psychotic symptoms are florid.



The impact of affective and cognitive fallacies can be assessed by research on the affective and cognitive indicators of quality of life. Happiness is often considered to be an affective evaluation of the quality of life, whereas life satisfaction is an evaluation with a stronger cognitive component (Veenhoven, 2009). This leads to three research questions:

1. What is the impact of mental disorders on average happiness and life satisfaction ratings in the general population?
2. Is a single item happiness measure valid in the context of mental disorders? In answering this question we also answer the question how serious the affective distortions are and what makes people with mental disorders happy.
3. Is it possible to detect signs of a cognitive psychopathological fallacy that renders life-satisfactions measures less useful for people with mental disorders?

## 8.2 *Method*

### 8.2.1 Respondents

The Netherlands Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study (NEMESIS) is a study on the prevalence, incidence, course and outcome of psychiatric disorders in a representative sample ( $N = 7,076$ ) of the general population aged 18–64 (Bijl et al. 1998b). The study is based on a sample of 90 Dutch municipalities, with the stratification of criteria urban residence and adequate distribution over the 12 Dutch provinces. The second step was to draw a sample of private households from post office registers. The number of households selected in each municipality was determined by its population size. The third step was to choose which individuals to interview.

The selected households were sent a letter of introduction signed by the national minister of public health asking them to take part. Shortly thereafter they were contacted by telephone by the interviewers. Households with no telephone or unlisted numbers (18%) were visited in person. In each household, the member with the most recent birthday was selected, on the condition that (s) he was between 18 and 64 years and sufficiently fluent in Dutch to be interviewed. Persons who were not immediately available, due to travel, hospitalization or imprisonment, were contacted later. To establish contact, the interviewers made a minimum of ten phone calls or visits to a given address at different times of the day and week. These procedures were approved by the ethics committee of the Netherlands Institute of Mental Health and Addiction.

In the initial data collection phase, from February through December 1996, 7,076 persons were interviewed. The response rate was 69.7%. The participants in the survey reflected well the Dutch population in terms of gender, civil status and urban residence. The 18–24 age group was underrepresented (Bijl et al. 1998b). All participants in the baseline interview were approached for follow-up. As at T0, if necessary the interviewers made at least ten phone calls or visits at various times of the day and week. Of the 7,076 persons who had taken part at T0, 5,618 were interviewed

12 months later at T1 (response 79.4%) and of these 4,796 subjects were interviewed 2 years later at T2 (response 85.4%) (De Graaf et al. 2000).

### 8.2.2 Mental Disorder

The Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI), Version 1.1 (computerized version) (Robins et al. 1989) was used to determine mental disorders. The CIDI is a structured interview that was developed by the World Health Organization (Wittchen et al. 1991) and is based on the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS) and the Present State Examination (PSE). It is designed for use by trained interviewers who are not clinicians. CIDI 1.1 contains two diagnostic programs to compute diagnoses according to the criteria and definitions of either DSM-III-R or ICD-10. The CIDI is now being used worldwide, and WHO field trials have documented acceptable reliability and validity (e.g. Wittchen, 1994). The following DSM-III-R diagnoses are recorded in NEMESIS: mood disorders (depression, dysthymia, bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders (panic disorder, agoraphobia, simple phobia, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder) psychoactive substance use disorders (alcohol or drug abuse and dependence, including sedatives, hypnotics and anxiolytics), eating disorders, schizophrenia and other non-affective psychotic disorders. In our analysis we used the 1-month prevalence of disorders. We excluded the people with eating disorders (N = 20) and schizophrenia (N = 5) from our sample, because the number of the people affected were too low to have sufficient statistical power.

### 8.2.3 Happiness

Happiness was measured using a single question taken from the Short-Form-36 Health Survey (SF-36) (Ware and Sherbourne, 1992) about the frequency of happy moods during the past 4 weeks. The (reversed) scale ranged from 1 = never felt happy, 2 = rarely felt happy, 3 = sometimes felt happy, 4 = often felt happy, 5 = usually felt happy, until 6 = always felt happy. Our measurement tried to tap Daniel Kahneman's (2000) notion of 'objective happiness', which is the 'raw' affective experience that underlies the overall evaluation of life, because answers to questions about the subjective evaluation of life as a whole are more vulnerable to distortions.

### 8.2.4 Life-Satisfaction

Satisfaction was measured with questions starting with: 'how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your ...' and ended with 'most important activity', 'relationships with friends', 'family life', 'recreation', 'current housing', 'income', and 'life in general'. The (reversed) scale ranged from 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = rather dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied or dissatisfied, 4 = rather satisfied, 5 = very satisfied. We also used one item from the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) that asks: 'taking all together I am satisfied with myself'. The reversed scale for this item ranged from 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = totally agree. When we present data about life-satisfaction next to data about happiness we transformed the

scores and to a six point scale, for ease of comparison. These measurements were used to evaluate the potential cognitive distortions in the context of mental disorders.

#### 8.2.5 Socio-Demographic Variables

We included age, gender, educational attainment, cohabitation status; living with a partner or not, irrespective of children, employment status; in paid employment or not, and degree of urban living (rural = municipalities with fewer than 500 addresses per square kilometer; urban = larger municipalities).

#### 8.2.6 Mental Ill-Being

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) has been developed as a screener for non-psychotic mental disorders in the general population. It provides a general measure of mental ill-being, independent of the specific psychiatric diagnosis (Koeter and Ormel, 1991). In our analyses we used the sum score, which indicates the seriousness of mental health problems. The internal reliability of this questionnaire in our research cohort was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

#### 8.2.7 Mastery

Locus of control was assessed with the 5-item Mastery Scale (Rotter, 1996), with high scores on mastery corresponding to an internal locus of control. The internal reliability of this questionnaire in our research cohort was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). This measurement was included in our analyses because it is known that mastery has a high correlation with happiness, and we expected that mental disorders have a negative impact on mastery.

#### 8.2.8 Neuroticism

Neuroticism was assessed with the Groninger Neuroticism Questionnaire containing 14 items (Ormel, 1980). The internal reliability of the questionnaire in our research cohort was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ ). A higher score indicates higher levels of neuroticism. Neuroticism is included in our analyses, because personality factors are among the strongest and most predictive factors associated with happiness (Diener et al. 1999).

#### 8.2.9 Self-Esteem

We assessed self-esteem with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). A high score indicates high self-esteem (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). This measurement was included because of the expected correlation with both happiness and mental disorders.

#### 8.2.10 Analyses

Our research questions were addressed using descriptive analyses, with the help of SPSS 16.0. We obtained the correlations between our happiness measures and other variables. In Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 we used Kendall's tau<sub>b</sub>. When we assessed the

validity of our happiness measure for people without mental disorders, we first used the data collected in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2010) as a comparison. Then we assessed if our happiness measure behaved as could be expected based on existing literature for people without mental disorders and then for people with mental disorders. We assessed the congruent, ecological and predictive validity.

In Tables 1 and 3 our happiness variable was dichotomized in infrequent happy moods (1, 2, 3) and frequent happy moods (felt at least often happy, 4, 5, 6). When we assessed if the correlations for people with and without mental disorders differed significantly, we used Fischer  $r$ -to- $z$  transformations.

### *8.3 Results*

#### **8.3.1 Question 1: The Impact of Mental Disorders on Average Happiness and Life Satisfaction**

Average happiness at T0 ( $N = 7,069$ ) in our sample from the general population was 4.77 (SD 1.06) and average life satisfaction ( $N = 7,075$ ) was 5.13 (SD 0.94). As expected happiness and life-satisfaction are lower for people with mental disorders. The average happiness for people with mental disorders ( $N = 1,135$ ) is 4.12 (SD 1.35) and average life-satisfaction ( $N = 1,137$ ) is 4.55 (SD 1.24). If we excluded people with 1-month mental disorders from our sample, the average happiness and life satisfaction was higher. Average happiness for the general population without mental disorders ( $N = 5,934$ ) is 4.90 (SD 0.95) and average life satisfaction for this group ( $N = 5,938$ ) is 5.24 (SD 0.83).

##### **8.3.1.1 Discussion**

As expected the exclusion of people with mental disorders from our sample, led to higher average happiness and life-satisfaction. The difference was modest. In percentages, happiness was raised by 2, 7 and life-satisfaction by 2, 1%. This may indicate that people with mental disorders do not disturb survey ratings of happiness and life-satisfaction, but we think that it is too early for such a conclusion. The average happiness and life-satisfaction of people with mental disorders is not very low. This could mean that the affective and cognitive psychopathological fallacies may make people dissatisfied and unhappy without an objective base in the circumstances of life. It also could be that some people with mental disorders report unwarranted levels of happiness and satisfaction that may be the result from lacking insight in their own situation. Again this could seriously hamper the reliability of survey results, so we checked the validity of our happiness and life-satisfaction measure.

**Table 1** Happiness during the past 4 weeks among people with mental disorders

| Mental disorder during previous month | N    | Percentage that felt at least often happy during the last 4 weeks (CI 95%) | Pure cases N | Percentage that felt at least often happy during the last 4 weeks (CI 95%) |
|---------------------------------------|------|--|--------------|--|
| No disorder                           | 5934 | 89.1 (88.3–89.9)   |              |  |
| Any disorder                          | 1104 | 66.6 (63.8–69.4)   | 781          | 76.1 (73.1–79.0)   |
| <b>Any mood disorder</b>              | 282  | 30 (24–35)   | 102          | 37 (28–47)   |
| Major depression                      | 185  | 22 (16–28)   | 55           | 29 (17–41)   |
| Bipolar disorder                      | 42   | 43 (27–58)   | 17           | 53 (26–79)   |
| Dysthymia                             | 127  | 32 (24–41)   | 30           | 43 (25–62)   |
| <b>Any anxiety disorder</b>           | 691  | 66 (62–69)   | 426          | 80 (76–84)   |
| Panic disorder                        | 103  | 42 (32–51)   | 29           | 79 (64–95)   |
| Agoraphobia                           | 77   | 62 (51–73)   | 27           | 78 (61–95)   |
| Social phobia                         | 263  | 60 (54–66)   | 121          | 76 (68–84)   |
| Simple phobia                         | 399  | 69 (65–74)   | 231          | 84 (79–89)   |
| Generalized anxiety disorder          | 54   | 50 (36–64)   | 13           | 54 (22–85)   |
| Obsessive ompulsive disorder          | 19   | 32 (9–55)  | 5            | 60 (0–100)   |
| <b>Any abuse or dependency</b>        | 334  | 76 (71–81)   | 253          | 85 (81–90)   |
| Alcohol abuse                         | 139  | 90 (85–95)   | 119          | 94 (90–98)   |
| Alcohol dependence                    | 164  | 69 (62–76)   | 115          | 81 (74–88)   |
| Drug abuse                            | 14   | 71 (44–99)   | 5            | 80 (24–100)  |
| Drug dependence                       | 36   | 50 (33–67)   | 14           | 50 (20.0–80.0)   |

### 8.3.2 Question 2: The Validity of Happiness Measures in the Context of Mental Disorders

Mental disorders are not synonymous with deep unhappiness. Table 1 shows the percentages of people with different mental disorders at T0 that report to have been happy at least often. Notably people with pure anxiety disorders and substance abuse disorders report frequent happy moods.

A first indication for the validity of our happiness measure is that happiness reports reflect the clinical characteristics of the disorder. People report lower happiness if they have more serious conditions. For example, people abusing substances or alcohol are happier than people being dependent. In the anxiety disorders, the simple phobia is associated with most frequent happy moods and the obsessive compulsive and generalized anxiety disorders are associated with least frequent happy moods. In the mood disorders, dysthymia is associated with more frequent happy moods than a major depressive disorder. Table 1 also shows that people with pure disorders are happier than people with more than one disorder.

One possible explanation for the frequent happy moods of people with mental disorders is that they have lowered their standards for happiness, so that they might describe their mood as happy, although in reality their moods are low. If this were the case, we would expect that people with more chronic conditions, would show clearer signs of adaptation to low moods and report higher levels of happiness. We compared people with any mental disorder during T2 according to their history during earlier measurements at T0 and T1. In this sample, the people without mental disorders at T0 or T1 ( $N = 157$ ) reported an average happiness of 4.1 (95% CI. 3.9–4.3). The people with any mental disorder during T0 or T1 ( $N = 125$ ) reported an average happiness of 3, 7 (95% CI. 3.5–4.0), and the people with any mental during both T0 and T1 ( $N = 102$ ) reported 3.6 (95% CI. 3.3–3.9). Happiness was lower for people who were diagnosed more often as having a mental disorder, i.e. those who had a more chronic condition. This seems to indicate that more frequent happiness is not a sign of lowering standards and adaptation, but an indication that the condition is less serious.

### 8.3.3 Congruent Validity

We assessed at T0 if our happiness measure is correlated with other measurements in the way that could be expected on the basis of existing literature. We first focused on people without mental disorders. This yielded the expected results (Table 2). For example, people who are satisfied with life and family relationships, who feel vivacious and relaxed, and do not suffer from loneliness report higher levels of happiness. The same is true for people with high levels of self-esteem and mastery, and low levels of mental ill-being and neuroticism.

The congruent validity of our happiness measure seemed valid for people without mental disorders. When we repeated the procedure with people with mental disorders, we got essentially the same results, with one meaningful difference (Table 3). The correlations are higher for people with mental disorders than for people without mental disorders. The difference between the correlations coefficients was significant.

**Table 2** Correlates of happiness among people with and without mental disorders

| Characteristic                           | No disorder<br>previous month | Any disorder<br>previous month | Difference in<br>correlations |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Single items</b>                      |                               |                                |                               |
| Life satisfaction                        | 0.39**                        | 0.53**                         | 0.14**                        |
| Satisfaction with<br>family life         | 0.36**                        | 0.41**                         | 0.06*                         |
| Felt did something<br>meaningful lately? | 0.13**                        | 0.27**                         | 0.14**                        |
| Felt lonely                              | -0.19**                       | -0.33**                        | 0.14**                        |
| Felt vivacious                           | 0.40**                        | 0.48**                         | 0.08**                        |
| Felt calm, relaxed                       | 0.40**                        | 0.47**                         | 0.07**                        |
| <b>Questionnaires</b>                    |                               |                                |                               |
| Self-esteem                              | 0.27**                        | 0.34**                         | 0.07*                         |
| Neuroticism                              | -0.31**                       | -0.46**                        | 0.15**                        |
| Mastery                                  | 0.26**                        | 0.39**                         | 0.13**                        |
| Mental ill-being                         | -0.30**                       | -0.45**                        | 0.15**                        |

\*  $P < 0.05$  (two tailed)

\*\*  $P < 0.01$  (two tailed)

We tested if the difference was an artifact of the skewness of the distribution of our happiness measure. Therefore we created a new happiness variable that was corrected for the (mild) negative skewed distribution (-1.11), but this did not result in a significant moderation of the differences in the correlations between the groups with and without mental disorders.

#### 8.3.4 Ecological Validity

The existing literature indicates that objective circumstances explain a small part of the variation in happiness, and this is what we noticed in our sample at T0 as well. Factors such as gender, household income, level of education are very modestly correlated with happiness. The objective circumstances explain little variance in happiness. This is true for people with and without mental disorders. The differences between the two groups are sometimes significant, but so small that we did not try to interpret the difference.

To further assess the ecological validity of our happiness measure for people with mental disorders, we focused on indicators for the seriousness of one's disorder. Happier respondents with mental disorders had less days absent from work because of the mental disorder (Kendall tau-b =  $-0.25$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), used less sleeping pills (Kendall tau-b =  $-0.17$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), less anti-depressives (Kendall tau-b =  $-0.15$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), less tranquillizers (Kendall tau-b =  $-0.16$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), and less pain killers (Kendall tau-b =  $-0.10$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ).

### 8.3.5 Predictive Validity

Frequent happy moods at T0 reduces the chances of having a mental disorder 1 year later at T1. This was true for people with mental disorders at T0 (Kendall tau-b =  $0.19$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and for people without mental disorders at T0 (Kendall tau-b =  $0.07$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). The difference in the correlations was again significant ( $P < 0.01$ ). Table 3 shows the chances of having a mental disorder at T1 for different groups.

**Table 3** Course of any mental disorder among people with and without frequent feelings of happiness at baseline (T0)

|                               | No disorder at T1<br>N = 4756 (%) | Any disorder at T1<br>N = 836 (%) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| No frequent happy moods at T0 | 89.3                              | 57.7                              |
| At least often happy at T0    | 96.2                              | 75.4                              |

#### 8.3.5.1 Discussion

In this part of the study we checked if affective psychopathological fallacies that comes with mental disorders render happiness ratings less valid. We can reject this idea on four grounds. The first is that happiness reflects clinical characteristics of mental disorders. People diagnosed as having a mental disorder report less happiness than people without, and more serious disorders are associated with less happiness. Other indicators of the severity of mental disorders such as the chronic nature of the disorder and the existence of comorbid mental disorder are also negatively correlated with happy moods.

The congruent validity, ecological and predictive validity of happiness is satisfactory in the context of mental disorders. The same psychological factors that are associated with happiness in the general population are correlated with happiness for people with mental disorders. More frequent happy moods predict the recovery from mental disorders 1 year later. Sociodemographic factors that are largely uncorrelated with happiness for people without mental disorders, are also not, or very modestly, correlated with happiness for people with mental disorders.



There was however one meaningful difference between the people with and without mental disorders. Psychological factors show a significantly higher correlation with happiness for people with mental disorders than for people without mental disorders. This suggests that people with mental disorders have a higher sensitivity for psychological problems that can harm their moods.

Among people with mental disorders, those with high self-esteem, who feel in control of their lives, who feel vivacious, relaxed and have high emotional stability (low neuroticism), who are satisfied with life and family relationships, and have less symptoms of psychological ill-health are most likely to experience frequent happy moods. The level of happiness is lowered in mental disorders, but conditions of happiness are the same for people with and without mental disorders.

#### 8.3.6 Question 3: The Validity of Life-Satisfaction Measures in the Context of Mental Disorders

In the introduction we mentioned that research has shown that the subjective experience of life is more negative in mental disorders than outsiders consider justified. The direct way to check if this is true is showing that the relationships between life satisfaction and the objective circumstances of life are significant for people without

**Table 4** Correlates of general life-satisfaction and sociodemographic characteristics of people with and without mental disorders

| Characteristic              | No disorder<br>previous month | Any disorder<br>previous month | Difference in<br>correlations |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Gender (male=0, female=1)   | 0.09**                        | 0.00                           | -0.09**                       |
| Age                         | -0.02                         | -0.07*                         | 0.05                          |
| Urbanization                | 0.06**                        | 0.07*                          | 0.01                          |
| Living alone or with others | 0.18**                        | 0.20**                         | 0.02                          |
| Household income            | 0.14**                        | 0.19**                         | 0.05                          |
| Paid job                    | 0.02                          | 0.11**                         | 0.09**                        |
| Level of education          | -0.03                         | -0.06                          | 0.03                          |
| Had sex during past year    | 0.13**                        | 0.15**                         | 0.02                          |

\*  $P < 0.05$  (two tailed)

\*\*  $P < 0.01$  (two tailed)

mental disorders, and more modest or not significant for people with disorders. The problem with this approach is that life-satisfaction of people without disorders is very modestly correlated with actual circumstances. The same is true for people with mental disorders (Table 4). The exceptions are pay status of a job and gender. In general, we can conclude that the variance in life-satisfaction in The Netherlands cannot be explained with the help of the objective circumstances, and this as true for people with as for people without mental disorders.

Another test of the validity of the life-satisfaction measure is to assess how it correlates with satisfactions with life domains. A cognitive psychopathological fallacy could disturb the coherence of ratings. However, people with and without mental disorders showed the same coherence in judging their life-satisfaction (Table 5). There was no difference in the amount of variance explained, but for the different groups different aspects weighted more. For people with mental disorders the correlation with general life-satisfaction was higher for satisfaction with themselves and with recreation. For people without mental disorders the correlation was higher for satisfaction with income and with current housing.

**Table 5** Correlates of general life-satisfaction with satisfaction on different domains of life among people with and without mental disorders

| Satisfaction with          | No disorder<br>previous month | Any disorder<br>previous month | Difference in<br>correlations |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Family life                | 0.45**                        | 0.47**                         | 0.02                          |
| Most important activity    | 0.37**                        | 0.40**                         | 0.03                          |
| Relationships with friends | 0.36**                        | 0.34**                         | -0.02                         |
| Recreation                 | 0.33**                        | 0.40**                         | 0.07*                         |
| Income                     | 0.33**                        | 0.26**                         | -0.07*                        |
| Myself                     | 0.29**                        | 0.43**                         | 0.14**                        |
| Current housing            | 0.26**                        | 0.16**                         | -0.10                         |

\*  $P < 0.05$  (two tailed)

\*\*  $P < 0.01$  (two tailed)

The satisfaction with life of people with mental disorder do not show a clear sign of cognitive fallacies. This results runs counter to the message of Katschnig that self-rated happiness and satisfaction is the result of psychopathology. This might be due to the fact that Katschnig reports from clinical samples and we from the general population.

We therefore specifically looked at the life-satisfaction of the people with lowest levels of happiness. For people that report to have been happy never, seldom or sometimes during the past 4 weeks, we do get a significant difference between people with and without a disorder if we calculate the correlation (kendall tau-b) between happiness and life satisfaction. For unhappy people without a disorder, the association between life-satisfaction and happiness is 0.14 ( $P < 0.01$ ), whereas the association between life-satisfaction and happiness is 0.45 ( $P < 0.01$ ) for unhappy people with mental disorders. The difference is significant ( $P < 0.01$ ).

#### 8.3.6.1 Discussion

The coherence of satisfaction with life domains and general life satisfaction for people with and without mental disorders indicate that measures of life-satisfaction are useful for people. The cognitive psychopathological fallacies for people with mental disorders are not so strong that the life-satisfaction measures are incoherent. The almost absent correlation between life-satisfaction and objective life circumstances for people with and without mental disorders, also indicate that there are no good reasons to distrust the self-reports of people with mental disorders.

There is however ground for the observations mentioned in the introduction. People with mental disorders that are unhappy, are more dissatisfied with life than unhappy people without disorders. We think that this indicates that people with mental disorders are less able to distance themselves from their dominant moods. When they feel low, they are more dissatisfied with life, whereas unhappy people without disorders are able to correct their judgements for this affective bias. This is an importance difference, that is clinically significant, but we do not believe that we can conclude that we should regard this as a cognitive fallacy that renders life-satisfaction measures useless.

### 8.4 *General discussion*

#### 8.4.1 Happiness and Life Satisfaction Ratings in Surveys can be Used For Everyone

The fact that mental disorders are common in the general population does not rule out the possibility to use survey question about happiness or life-satisfaction. The existence of mental disorders has a very modest impact on average happiness ratings in the general population, and we could find no indication that affective or cognitive psychopathological fallacies make the measures less trustworthy.

#### 8.4.2 Happiness Measures are Valid for People with Mental Disorders

Our single item happiness rating shows satisfactory congruent, ecological and predictive validity for people with and without mental disorders. The same psychological factors that are associated with happiness for people without mental disorders, are associated with happiness for people with mental disorders. The conditions of happiness are the same for people with and without mental disorders, but the conditions are relatively more important for people with disorders.

#### 8.4.3 Life-Satisfaction is a Useful Indicator for Quality of Life for People with Mental Disorders

We could not find signs that a cognitive psychopathological fallacy rendered the life-satisfaction ratings less useful for people with mental disorders compared to those without disorders.

#### 8.4.4 More Sensitivity

We interpret the fact that happiness of people with mental disorders is more sensitive to psychological factors, as a logical consequence of the diathesis-stress theory of mental disorders (e.g. Monroe and Simons, 1991). The theory states people can have a specific vulnerability to develop a disorder and that the disorders occur if stressors exceed the coping mechanisms.

People without mental disorders are less sensitive, and psychological factors such as less self-esteem, less mastery and more neuroticism, have a smaller negative influence on their happiness and life-satisfaction ratings, compared to people with disorders. People with mental disorders experience more stress and every added problem therefore has a stronger impact. Unhappy people with low moods are more likely to be satisfied with life, probably because they are better able to correct their cognitive judgment for current affective influences.

#### 8.4.5 Practical Implications

Our findings have two important practical implications. The first is that we have found no reason to exclude happiness or life-satisfaction ratings of people with mental disorders in surveys in the general population. The happiness ratings of people with mental disorders in the general population are as valid as those of people without disorders.

The second implication is for positive psychology that seeks to improve positive psychological functioning. The natural target group for positive psychology interventions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) seem to be the people with mental disorders. They are least happy and show most room for improvement (Bergsma et al. in press b), and they might be most sensitive for enhancement of positive psychological factors. On the basis of our data we expect that interventions that raise self-esteem and mastery, and lower neuroticism and psychological ill-being, will give a higher return in gained happiness for people with mental disorders, because of the higher association of these factors with happiness. Helping people to find paid employment also can have a higher impact on happiness for the people with mental disorders.

We therefore agree with a pamphlet of the London School of Economics (2006) with the title *The depression report; A New Deal for Depression and Anxiety Disorders*. From an utilitarian point of view, the authors came to the conclusion that we should train an army of psychotherapists to raise happiness.

#### 8.4.6 Limitations

We used a measure of happiness that directly referred to dominant moods. In the literature about happiness another definition is more common. Veenhoven (1984, 22–24) defines happiness as ‘the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favorably’. In our data we did not have any data to study this concept of happiness. This form of happiness is considered to be built up by affects and thoughts, or moods and contentment with (domains of) life. In our study we were able to assess the validity of the components of overall happiness, but we did not study how people with and without mental disorders combined the two sources of information to judge their own overall happiness. This question warrants further study.

A second limitation is that we analysed the answers of people with mental disorders in a general survey. People with the most serious mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, are underrepresented in our sample. For the most severe forms of mental disorders the psychopathological fallacies mentioned by Katschnig are probably more important. Our results are relevant for general surveys, but not necessarily for clinical studies on quality of life with people with most severe forms of psychopathology.

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## The loss of happy life years associated with mental disorders in the Netherlands

### Summary

*How detrimental are mental disorders? One way to answer that question is to consider the effects on happiness. We analyzed a representative sample ( $N = 7076$ ) of the Dutch population, who were asked how often they had felt happy during the past four weeks. Mental disorders were assessed using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview. It turns out that the lowest levels of happiness are almost the exclusive domain of people with (a history of) mental disorders. The total loss of happy life years due to mental disorders is 36,6 million for the Netherlands.*

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There are many social problems and the means to meet these are scarce. This calls for priority setting, which requires urgency criteria. In the perspective of utilitarian moral philosophy (Bentham, 1907) priority should be given to the solution of problems that depress happiness most. In that context we explored how much happiness is lost in association with mental disorders in The Netherlands.

### *9.1 Method*

We studied who is unhappy in a representative sample (N = 7076) of the Dutch population, in the NEMESIS study (Bijl, Van Zessen, Ravelli, De Rijk & Langendoen, 1998). The respondents were interviewed using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (Wittchen et al., 1991) to assess mental disorders. Happiness was measured using a single question on how often respondents had felt happy during the past four weeks. Response options were: never felt happy (1), rarely felt happy (2), sometimes felt happy (3) often felt happy (4) usually felt happy (5), and always felt happy (6). This measure has been shown to be valid for people with mental disorders (Bergsma et al., 2010).

### *9.2 Results*

It turned out that 57.7 % of the people who never or rarely felt happy during the past four weeks suffered from a mental disorder and an additional 26.9 % had a history of a mental disorder. We mention lifetime prevalence because psychopathology is associated with the residual functional disability when a disorder is cured or in remission (Bijl & Ravelli, 2000).

We have calculated for the first time the loss of ‘happy life years’ that is caused by different mental disorders. In this measure life expectancy in years is multiplied by average happiness on a scale of 0 – 1 (Veenhoven, 1996). The average happy life expectancy for people who do not have a history of mental disorder is 63.2 years in the Netherlands.

The one-month prevalence of different mental disorders and the associated levels of happiness was used in the calculations of the loss of happy life years for different mental disorders. It was taken into account that unhappiness is associated with a loss of longevity (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, Veenhoven, 2008). The median group that had felt happy sometimes or often was given an average life expectancy. The most happy group (usually or always happy) got an additional 2.5 months of life and the most unhappy group (never or rarely happy) lost five life years. This is roughly what the available research tells us. We did not add an extra loss of life years for the people with addictions, although unhealthy drinking and drugs use can compromise life expectancy.

**Table 1** The burden of mental disorders in loss of happy life years for the population of the Netherlands

| Diagnosis                                  | Loss in happy life years for one person <sup>15</sup> | % of the population affected | Total loss of happy life years for NL. |
|--|---|------------------------------|--|
| Any mental disorder during the past month  | 14,2  | 15,7                         | 36,6 10 <sup>6</sup>                   |
| Any mood disorder during the past month    | 31,8  | 4,0                          | 2,6 10 <sup>6</sup>                    |
| Any anxiety disorder during the past month | 14,6  | 9,8                          | 23,6 10 <sup>6</sup>                   |
| Any substance abuse disorder past month    | 10,1  | 4,8                          | 7,9 10 <sup>6</sup>                    |

It is not possible to add up the total loss of happy life years for the different disorders, to get the total sum, because 4.6 % of our respondents had more than one mental disorder. It is especially the existence a co-morbid mood disorder that enhances the loss of happy life years of the anxiety and substance abuse disorders.

### 9.3 Conclusion

Not everybody with a mental disorder is unhappy (Bergsma et al., in press), but is apparent that the loss of happiness associated with mental disorders is enormous. The 36,6 million loss of happy life years is a conservative estimate, because we did not take the residual functional disability into account that is characteristic for people who have a history of mental disorder, but do not meet the criteria for a disorder at the time of measurement. Mental disorders should therefore be regarded as a social problem that deserves priority in public policy. Investment in mental health care is likely to add substantially to greater happiness of a greater number.

<sup>15</sup> This is a fictive person who will suffer from a mental disorder during his or her whole life. In reality the disorders come and go and the burden is spread among more people.

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## De meeste mensen met psychische stoornissen zijn gelukkig

### Summary

*Rates of mental disorder are high in western countries and numbers of people seeking treatment for depressions are rising. This trend is commonly attributed to the perils of modern individualistic society. We argue that the fact that more people seek help for mental disorders, is not indicative for a harmful trend in society. Happiness is rising and is more evenly distributed. Even most people with a mental disorder are in a good mood. They profit from the favorable living conditions. However, it is also clear that a minority of the people with mental disorders are responsible for 85% percent of the lowest levels of happiness of all citizens. The burden of the disorders in terms of lost happy life years is enormous, and this calls for continued focus on treatment and prevention. In this context it would be wise if positive psychologists would specifically dedicate themselves to raising happiness of people with mental disorders, a task that may be neglected if positive psychologists distance themselves from the old 'negative' psychology. Positive psychologists better not limit themselves to study the flourishing of mentally healthy people.*

This chapter appeared in Psychologie en Gezondheid

## 10.1 Introductie

‘Als het zo is dat toegenomen welvaart, vrede en persoonlijke vrijheid steeds meer depressieve mensen geeft, dan kun je blijkbaar wel ophouden vrede en welvaart na te streven.’ Dit zei Trudy Dehue in het Dagblad van het Noorden op zaterdag 21 juni 2008, als antwoord op de vraag waarom haar boek *De depressie-epidemie* heeft geleid tot zoveel belangstelling van de pers.

En inderdaad, er lijkt iets te wringen. Als je naar de antwoorden bij enquêtes kijkt, dan behoort Nederland tot de meest gelukkige landen ter wereld. Tegelijkertijd becijferde het College voor Zorgverzekeringen dat Nederland in 2006 ruim één miljoen gebruikers van anti-depressiva telde, wat neerkomt op ongeveer 6 procent van de bevolking. Deze bevinding is niet uniek voor Nederland. Ook elders in het welvarende Westen komen psychische stoornissen en depressies vaak voor (Wittchen & Jacobi, 2005).

Dehue geeft als verklaring dat het begrip depressie onder invloed van het neoliberale marktdenken een verandering heeft ondergaan. Mensen die weinig initiatief vertonen, die te veel berusten in de ongunstige spelingen van het lot, heten tegenwoordig al snel depressief. De illusie van de maakbare samenleving is ingeruild voor de illusie van het maakbare individu. De achterblijvers zijn losers en worden terug op de rails gezet met pillen, die overigens nauwelijks beter werken dan placebo's (Dehue, 2008).

Dehue zet zich af tegen het steeds dwingender opleggen van ideaalbeelden aan de mensen die ‘de wil of het vermogen ontberen om bij de geslaagde top te behoren’. Ze zou graag zien dat ieder voor zich in de kapitalistische samenleving, plaats zou maken voor meer sociale omgangsvormen waarin meer respect is voor individuele verschillen en waarin de zwakkeren beter worden opgevangen. De depressie-epidemie vat zij op als een signaal dat we te veel aan individuen proberen te sleutelen.

Andere auteurs komen met tegengestelde aanbevelingen. Jan Walburg (2008), directeur van het Trimbos-instituut, pleit er in zijn boek *Mentaal vermogen; Investeren in geluk* voor de veerkracht van individuen verder uit te bouwen, ook als zij een psychische stoornis hebben. Hij denkt dat het welbevinden van mensen met psychische stoornissen zal toenemen, als zij zes principes van duurzaam geluk onder de knie krijgen. Dit zijn: 1) Positief en optimistisch denken, 2) Leven vanuit een betekenisvolle missie en dit succesvol na kunnen streven, 3) Bewust leven en genieten, 4) Interactie met anderen, 5) Een gezonde levensstijl, en tot slot 6) Geluk delen.

Waar Dehue stelt dat mensen te veel aan ideaalbeelden moeten voldoen, pleit Walburg ervoor om mensen te helpen het ideaalbeeld waar te maken. Dehue varieert op een klassiek anti-psychiatrisch sentiment dat een stoornis een begrijpelijke reactie kan zijn op ongezonde omstandigheden, terwijl Walburg juist meer psychiatrie en psychologie noodzakelijk acht om mensen verder te verbeteren.

Het is mogelijk een betere keuze te maken tussen deze tegengestelde gezichtspunten als we ons concentreren op de vragen die Dehue oproept over de huidige maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen. Uitgangspunt is daarbij de utilitaristische filosofie

van Bentham (1789), die ervan uitgaat dat we als maatschappij moeten streven naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal (Veenhoven, 2004).

De eerste vraag in dit kader is of onze maatschappij onevenredig veel ongeluk veroorzaakt bij ‘losers’, die al dan niet een psychische stoornis kunnen hebben. We zullen ons daarbij niet alleen concentreren op mensen met een depressie, maar op iedereen met een psychische stoornis. We doen dit omdat de vraag uit het openingscitaat van dit artikel door andere auteurs is gesteld met betrekking tot psychische stoornissen in het algemeen. Immers, van een stoornis is alleen sprake als iemands gesteldheid lijden veroorzaakt voor de persoon zelf of voor diens sociale omgeving (APA, 1994). Hoe kan het dat Nederland een relatief gelukkig land is, terwijl er zoveel mensen met stoornissen zijn?

De tweede vraag is of het voorkomen van depressies, of meer algemeen psychische stoornissen, een goede indicator vormt voor de leefbaarheid van de samenleving. Hierna kunnen we voorzichtig exploreren wat psychologen kunnen doen voor mensen die in de huidige omstandigheden weinig geluk vinden. We beginnen met de tweede vraag.

### *10.2 ‘Gestoord geluk’*

De tegenstelling tussen geluk en psychische stoornissen lijkt een onderdeel van de basisdefinitie van psychische stoornissen. Toch sluiten stoornissen en geluk elkaar niet uit. Headley en Wearing (1992) maakten een matrix aan de hand van twee dimensies waarop *well-being* en *ill-being* staan aangegeven. Voor de hand liggend is dat er mensen zijn die hoog scoren op zich goed voelen en laag op onbehagen, en dat er ook een groep is die hoog scoort op onbehagen en laag op zich goed voelen. Er bestaat echter ook een substantiële (ongevoelige?) groep die weinig positieve emoties ervaart zonder dat er sprake is van onbehagen en een (overgevoelige?) groep die zowel veel onbehagen als veel positieve gevoelens ervaart. Dit komt omdat de verschillende aspecten van *well-being*, zoals tevredenheid met het leven, geluk, zingeving en positieve stemming onderling hoog correleren, terwijl dit voor negatieve aspecten van *ill-being* zoals angstigheid, depressiviteit en negatieve stemming ook geldt. De positieve as vertoont echter slechts een bescheiden negatieve correlatie met de negatieve as.

Wat dit betekent voor het geluk van mensen met een psychische stoornis is bekeken aan de hand van gegevens uit de NEMESIS studie (Bergsma et al., submitted a). In dit onderzoek is een grootschalige steekproefproef getrokken (N = 7076) uit de bevolking van 18 tot 64 jaar (Bijl, Van Zessen et al, 1998). Diagnoses voor psychische stoornissen zijn gesteld met een standaard vragenlijst (CIDI) die door de Wereld gezondheidsorganisatie is ontwikkeld (World Health Organization, 1990). Psychische ongezondheid blijkt bepaald niet zeldzaam. 41 Procent van de Nederlandse bevolking heeft ooit een psychische stoornis gehad, terwijl de prevalentie per maand neerkomt op 15,7 procent.

De respondenten werd tevens gevraagd hoe vaak ze zich gelukkig hadden gevoeld de afgelopen maand. De scores liepen uiteen van 1 (nooit) tot 6 (voortdurend). Zoals verwacht hebben psychische stoornissen een negatieve invloed op het voorkomen van gelukkige stemmingen. Respondenten die geen psychische stoornissen hebben of hebben gehad scoren gemiddeld een 5,0, terwijl mensen met een stemmingstoornis blijven steken op 3,1. De mensen met een angststoornis scoren een 4,1 en de personen die alcohol of middelen misbruiken komen gemiddeld uit op een 4.3. De lage gemiddelde scores van de angst- en middelenstoornissen ontstaat met name door comorbide stemmingsstoornissen. Als in tabel 1 gekeken wordt naar zuivere angst en stemmingsstoornissen is het effect op het geluk een stuk minder groot.

Het lagere gemiddelde geluk van mensen met stoornissen laat echter onverlet dat de combinatie van veel onbehagen en veel geluk niet zeldzaam is. Tweederde deel van de mensen bij wie voor de afgelopen maand werd gediagnosticeerd dat ze lijden aan een psychische stoornis, vertelde dat ze zich de afgelopen vier weken minimaal vaak gelukkig hebben gevoeld (Bergsma et al, submitted a).

**Tabel 1.** Het percentage mensen dat zich gedurende de afgelopen vier weken op zijn minst vaak gelukkig heeft gevoeld uitgesplitst naar psychische stoornissen. Zowel de personen met pure psychische stoornissen als met psychiatrische comorbiditeit zijn weergegeven.<sup>16</sup>

| Soort psychische stoornis gedurende de afgelopen maand | Inclusief psychiatrische comorbiditeit<br>N | % op zijn minst vaak gelukkig de afgelopen maand (CI 95%) | Alleen pure stoornissen<br>N | % op zijn minst vaak gelukkig de afgelopen maand (CI 95%) |
|--|---|---|------------------------------|---|
| Geen stoornis  | 5934  | 89 (88 – 90)  |                              |   |
| Enigerlei stoornis                                     | 1104  | 67 (64 – 69)  | 781                          | 76 (73 – 79)  |
| Enigerlei stemmingsstoornis                            | 282   | 30 (24 – 35)  | 102                          | 37 (28 - 47)  |
| Enigerlei angststoornis                                | 691   | 66 (62 – 69)  | 426                          | 80 (76 – 84)  |
| Enigerlei aan middelen gerelateerde stoornis           | 334   | 76 (71 – 81)  | 253                          | 85 (81 – 90)  |

<sup>16</sup> De tabellen zijn met behulp van SPSS 16.0 gemaakt op basis van de NEMESIS data.



Hiermee is een deel van de vraag van Dehue beantwoord. Het veelvuldige voorkomen van psychische stoornissen kan niet gebruikt worden als een indicatie dat onze samenleving geen geluk biedt aan burgers in het algemeen of aan de betrokkenen in het bijzonder. Het gemiddelde geluk voor alle volwassenen uit de steekproef die op dit moment geen stoornis hebben is 4,90. Als we alle mensen met een stoornis ook meetellen zakt het gemiddelde op bescheiden wijze naar 4,78. Psychische stoornissen kunnen veel leed veroorzaken voor individuen, maar ze trekken niet direct het gemiddelde geluksniveau naar beneden, zoals armoede, corruptie, misdaad en onvrijheid dat wel doen (Veenhoven, 2004).

#### 10.2.1 Is het gerapporteerde geluk echt?

Ho eens even, zult u misschien denken. Dertig procent van de mensen met depressies zegt dat zij zich vaak gelukkig voelen en er zijn zelfs individuen met deze diagnose die van zichzelf zeggen dat ze zich voortdurend gelukkig hebben gevoeld de afgelopen vier weken. Is er dan niet iets mis met het gerapporteerde geluk of met de diagnose?

We concentreren ons eerst op het gerapporteerde geluk. De validiteit van geluksmetingen zijn al op veel manieren tegen het licht gehouden en daarbij blijkt steeds dat antwoorden op enquêtevragen naar geluk redelijk corresponderen met hoe mensen zich over het algemeen voelen (Diener, 1994). Ons onderzoek levert goede argumenten op om aan te nemen dat dit nauwelijks anders is onder mensen met een psychische stoornis.

Allereerst blijkt dat de geluksmeting in die categorie een aardige aanduiding geeft voor de ernst van de psychische stoornissen. Mensen met meer chronische psychische stoornissen – wat algemeen beschouwd wordt als een aanwijzing voor ernstiger psychopathologie – zijn minder vaak gelukkig. Ernstiger stoornissen zoals een depressie of obsessief-compulsieve stoornis gaan gepaard met minder gelukkige stemmingen dan lichtere stoornissen als dysthymie of enkelvoudige fobie. Verder blijkt geluk de kans op remissie van de stoornis te bevorderen. Gelukkige mensen met een stoornis hebben 12 maanden later, tijdens de tweede meting, beduidend minder kans dat de stoornis nog aanwezig is, dan de mensen met een stoornis die zich minder vaak of nooit gelukkig voelen (zie tabel 2).

De gelukkige stemmingen van mensen met en zonder psychische stoornissen blijken bovendien op vrijwel identieke wijze samen te hangen met andere psychologische maten. Zelfverzekerde, energieke, ontspannen, emotioneel stabiele (die laag scoren op neuroticisme), goed functionerende mensen met een psychische stoornis, zijn gelukkiger dan mensen met een stoornis die deze kenmerken missen. Voor de objectieve omstandigheden geldt hetzelfde. De gelukkige mensen met een stoornis verzuimen veel minder op hun werk, zijn minder vaak ziek, doen minder vaak een beroep op de hulpverlening, en gebruiken minder pijnbestrijding, dan de mensen met een stoornis zonder gelukkige stemmingen. (Bergsma et al., submitted a).

**Tabel 2.** Odd's ratio's voor de kans op enige psychische stoornis tijdens de tweede meting voor de mensen die op eerste meting een stoornis hadden, onderverdeeld naar verschillende geluksniveaus. Gecorrigeerd voor de demografische *confounders* geslacht, leeftijd, opleiding en urbanisatiegraad.

| Hoe vaak gelukkig laatste vier weken bij meting 1 | Relatieve kans op enige stoornis een jaar later | 95 % interval betrouwbaarheid |
|---|---|-------------------------------|
| Nooit   | 5,4   | 2,0 – 14,5                    |
| Zelden  | 3,9   | 1,9 – 7,8                     |
| Soms  | 1,8   | 0,9 – 3,4                     |
| Vaak  | 1,5   | 0,8 – 2,9                     |
| Meestal   | 1,1   | 0,6 – 2,0                     |
| Voortdurend                                       | 1 (vergelijkingsstandaard)                      |                               |

Er zijn dus geen aanwijzingen gevonden om te twijfelen aan de validiteit van de geluksmeting bij mensen met een stoornis. Je zou de combinatie van geluk met psychische stoornissen wel op kunnen vatten als steun voor de veronderstelling dat de grootschalige bevolkingsonderzoeken leiden tot een overschatting van het aantal psychische stoornissen. Voor een flink deel van de mensen die geen hulp zoeken voor hun stoornis geldt misschien dat de lijdensdruk niet hoog genoeg is of dat zij van zichzelf vaak weten dat zij de problemen wel aankunnen (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2006, 2007).

Dehue ziet echter weinig in een dergelijke discussie. Het idee dat we tegenwoordig te lichte ziektebeelden bestempelen als depressies doet zij als volgt af: 'De betekenis van woorden schuilt louter in het gebruik ervan en niet in een of andere essentie die zou kunnen bestaan buiten concrete mensen om.' (Dehue 2008, pag. 256) Wie denkt dat we tegenwoordig te lichte depressies bestrijden, gaat er ten onrechte vanuit dat de depressie een monolithisch probleem is. Het 'ziektebeeld' depressie blijkt zelfs zo divers te zijn dat het kan voorkomen met frequente gevoelens van geluk.

Tot nu toe hebben we gezien dat mensen met stoornissen zich regelmatig gelukkig voelen en dat er geen reden is om te twijfelen aan dit zelfgerapporteerde geluk. Dit impliceert dat we geen goed beeld krijgen van de leefbaarheid van de samenleving als we alleen een negatieve indicator gebruiken, namelijk hoe vaak psychische stoornissen, of meer specifiek depressies voorkomen. Het beeld wordt pas compleet als we ook naar het ervaren geluk kijken.

### 10.3 Individualisme

We kunnen daarom nu verder met de eerste vraag die Dehue opwerpt. Is de inrichting van onze maatschappij schadelijk voor de individuen die slecht mee kunnen komen? Dehue pleit niet voor het afschaffen van vrede en welvaart, zoals het openingscitaat suggereert, maar plaatst wel kanttekeningen bij de toename van individuele vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid. Onder invloed van het neoliberale marktdenken is het accent komen te liggen op het zelfredzame individu.

Als we dit vraagstuk bekijken door de bril van het onderzoek naar geluk, dan is de somberheid van Dehue over deze maatschappelijke trend niet te staven. Een hogere mate van individualisme hangt samen met hogere gemiddelde niveaus van welbevinden, mede doordat de individualistische samenleving een betere aansluiting biedt tussen sociale rollen en individuele voorkeuren en vaardigheden. (Ahuvia, 2002, Veenhoven, 1999). En meer specifiek: tijdens de periode waarin het neoliberalisme dominant was, is het gemiddelde geluksniveau licht toegenomen (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006).

Ook de gedachte dat er sprake is van een Verelendung van de achterblijvers vindt geen steun in het geluksonderzoek. De laatste decennia is de ongelijkheid in geluk (standaard deviatie) beduidend afgenomen in alle westerse landen, en dat komt vooral door afname van het percentage zeer ongelukkigen (Veenhoven, 2005).

Dehue legt in haar boek dus te eenzijdig de nadruk op de verliezers van de neoliberale, economische concurrentiestrijd. Het lijkt ook mogelijk uit te leggen waarom concurrentie minder zwaar weegt dan Dehue suggereert. Als je kijkt naar de prioriteiten die mensen voor een gelukkig leven stellen, dan zie je dat voor de meeste van deze gebieden concurrentie niet zwaar telt. In westerse landen is men het in grote lijnen eens over het belang van liefde, seks, vriendschap, vrije tijd, rijkdom, werk en gezondheid. Bij ten minste vijf van deze levensdomeinen geldt dat het geluk van de één niet automatisch ten koste gaat van de vreugde van de ander. Als u er een vriend bij krijgt is dat ook prettig voor de vriend en het brengt niet automatisch schade toe aan andere vriendschappen. Er is met andere woorden geen sprake van zero sum games. (Headey & Wearing, 1992). Meer individualisme betekent niet automatisch dat er meer verliezers zijn als het gaat om de zaken die er het meest toe doen voor ons geluk.

#### 10.3.1 Meer zelfredzaamheid vergroot vraag om hulp

De algemene tendens over de leefbaarheid van onze maatschappij baart dus niet veel zorgen, maar dat laat onverlet dat ook lichte depressies het welbevinden schaden. Hoe moeten we de boodschap van de depressie-epidemie interpreteren? Een eerste mogelijkheid is dat de combinatie van psychische stoornissen en geluk juist mogelijk wordt gemaakt door een goede leefbaarheid van onze samenleving. Ook mensen met psychische stoornissen kunnen rekenen op een goede gezondheidszorg, een eerlijke regering en de bescherming van de rechtsstaat. Ze leven in een democratische en individualistische cultuur die het welbevinden stimuleert (Veenhoven, 1999). De

laatste jaren lijkt bovendien de acceptatie van veel voorkomende psychische stoornissen te zijn toegenomen en het stigma vermindert (Schnittker, 2008).

Een tweede verklaring gaat ervan uit dat is de depressie-epidemie geen antithese van een gelukkige samenleving is, omdat dat er slechts sprake is van een schijnbare tegenstelling. Dehue zelf maakt hierbij de treffende vergelijking met de plastische chirurgie. Schoonheidsoperaties worden steeds vaker uitgevoerd, maar aan de hand daarvan kan je niet concluderen dat we in Nederland steeds lelijker worden.

Het is misschien wel logisch dat mensen meer hulp nodig hebben voor psychische klachten, als zij leven in een meer individualistische en leefbare maatschappij. Immers, bij een grotere individuele keuzevrijheid hebben mensen meer vaardigheden nodig om daar constructief gebruik van te kunnen maken. Wie dat in zijn persoonlijkheid, opvoeding of opleiding niet heeft meegekregen, doet een beroep op een helpende hand.

Vanuit dit perspectief gezien bieden psychologen en medici individualistische oplossingen aan voor de uitdagingen van de moderne maatschappij. Een andere denkwijze hoeft immers niet altijd bevocht te worden met therapie of opleidingen, maar ook met pillen. Voor deze mogelijkheid werd onder meer reclame gemaakt in Peter Kramers juichende boek *Listening to Prozac* dat in Nederland op de markt werd gebracht onder de titel *Prozac, of hoe een geneesmiddel je persoonlijkheid kan verbeteren* (Kramer, 1994).

De combinatie van een grotere vraag om hulp en meer individuele verantwoordelijkheid is al eerder beschreven. Starker (1989) beschrijft dat het fenomeen zelfhulpboeken een vlucht heeft genomen toen Jefferson meer dan twee eeuwen geleden de ‘individuele jacht op geluk’ in de onafhankelijkheidsverklaring had beschreven als een van de basisrechten van burgers in de Verenigde Staten. Het rigide klassensysteem uit Europa werd daarmee vervangen door een open systeem waarin ‘*a man could hope to rise in station according to his merits and abilities, and to be judged solely on the basis of his individual accomplishments*’ (Starker 1989, p 169). Zelfhulpboeken boden de beschrijving van denk- en handelwijzen waarmee mensen hun weg kunnen vinden in een individualistische maatschappij (Bergsma, 2008).

Het zal dan ook niet toevallig zijn dat de recente stijging van de behandelingen van depressies gepaard is gegaan met zeer sterk stijgende oplagen van zelfhulpbladen als *Psychologie Magazine* en de komst van concurrenten als *Mind Magazine* en *Aware*. *Mind Magazine* vangt de tijdgeest heel aardig met de onderkop ‘psychologie voor een leuker leven’, terwijl *Psychologie Magazine* de slogan ‘Haal meer uit jezelf’ hanteert.

De verklaring van Dehue voor de depressie-epidemie sluit hier op aan. Volgens haar zijn we harder met onszelf aan de slag zijn gegaan. De grootschalige depressiecampagnes wijzen mensen op het feit dat ze er zelf voor moeten zorgen dat ze goed functioneren (Dehue, 2008). Wie zich niet in het ideaalbeeld herkent, krijgt antidepressiva van de huisarts.

In het licht van het voorafgaande zou je kunnen concluderen dat dit een gunstige ontwikkeling is. De twijfel zit hem echter in de vraag of de geboden hulpverlening de uitvallers en achterblijvers daadwerkelijk op weg kan helpen naar een gelukkiger bestaan. Voor de meeste mensen die Dehue beschrijft, zijn alleen de antidepressiva

weggelegd en we hebben al opgemerkt dat er twijfels bestaan over de werkzaamheid ervan.

De gegevens van de NEMESIS-studie geven extra voer aan die twijfel. In deze studie zijn drie metingen gedaan met een tussenpoos van 12 en 36 maanden. Ook moesten vragen beantwoord worden over het gebruik van medicatie. Mensen met depressies die antidepressiva gebruiken bij de eerste meting zijn bij de volgende meting niet gelukkiger dan mensen met depressies die dit niet doen. Een belangrijke kanttekening bij deze conclusie is dat de kwaliteit van de gegevens over de gekregen behandeling zeer beperkt is. Zo weten we niet hoe lang de pillen zijn gebruikt. Het past daarom niet sterke conclusies te verbinden aan dit gegeven.

Samenvattend constateren we dat het geluksonderzoek wijst op een gunstige ontwikkeling in onze maatschappij. Er zijn wel achterblijvers, maar minder dan enkele decennia geleden. Meer verzoeken om hulp kunnen zelfs uitgelegd worden als een signaal dat de individualistische maatschappij goed functioneert. Wel is het een open vraag of de geboden hulpverlening er voldoende in slaagt mensen die uit zichzelf het geluk niet vinden, voldoende te veranderen zodat zij zich kunnen redden in een individualistische maatschappij.

#### *10.4 Gelukkige levensjaren*

De vorige paragraaf voerde tot de conclusie dat het leven in westerse maatschappijen dankzij vrede, welvaart en persoonlijke vrijheden langzaam beter wordt (Veenhoven, 2005). Toch betekent dit niet dat we de ideeën van Dehue kunnen wegwimpelen. Zij vraagt terecht aandacht voor het feit dat er ook in onze behoorlijk leefbare maatschappij, een grote groep blijkt te bestaan die moeite heeft zich staande te houden.

Deze groep kan ook in het NEMESIS-onderzoek aangewezen worden. Uit cijfers blijkt namelijk dat gelukkig zijn niet het exclusieve voorrecht is van mensen *zonder* stoornissen, maar andersom is ernstig ongeluk wel voor een groot deel voorbehouden aan mensen *met* psychische stoornissen (Bergsma et al, submitted a). 85 Procent van de groep die zich de afgelopen weken zelden of nooit gelukkig heeft gevoeld, behoort tot de mensen die nu een stoornis hebben of die er in het verleden een hebben gehad. Deze twee groepen zijn samen genomen, omdat bekend is dat mensen die van psychische stoornissen zijn hersteld, vaak last hebben van restverschijnselen (Bijl & Ravelli, 2000).

In Tabel 3 is uitgerekend wat de ziektelast is van de verschillende stoornissen in de vorm van het verlies aan gelukkige levensjaren per persoon en voor heel Nederland (Bergsma et al, submitted b). Hierbij is de verwachte levensduur vermenigvuldigd met een wegingsfactor voor geluk die loopt van 0 (nooit gelukkig) tot 1 (altijd gelukkig) (Veenhoven, 1996). De gemiddelde gelukkige levensverwachting voor de mensen in onze steekproef die nog nooit een stoornis hebben gehad is 63,2 jaar. De stemmingsstoornissen drukken de gelukkige levensverwachting van individuen het sterkst, maar voor de samenleving als geheel zorgt een geschiedenis van een

psychische stoornissen voor het grootste verlies van gelukkige levensjaren. Het geluk van mensen veert niet terug naar het gemiddelde niveau, wanneer de stoornis voorbij of in remissie is.

**Tabel 3.** De kosten van psychische stoornissen in gelukkige levensjaren voor de gehele Nederlandse bevolking.

|  | Verlies aan gelukkige levensjaren <sup>17</sup> per persoon <sup>18</sup> | % van de bevolking | Verlies aan gelukkige levensjaren voor heel Nederland <sup>19</sup> |
|--|---|--------------------|---|
| Ooit enige stoornis gehad  | 8,9   | 40,9               | 60,1 10 <sup>6</sup>  |
| Enige stoornis gedurende de afgelopen maand  | 14,2  | 15,7               | 36,6 10 <sup>6</sup>  |
| Stemmingstoornis gedurende de afgelopen maand  | 31,8  | 4,0                | 21,1 10 <sup>6</sup>  |
| Angststoornis gedurende de afgelopen maand   | 14,6  | 9,8                | 23,6 10 <sup>6</sup>  |
| Aan middelengebruik gerelateerde stoornis gedurende de afgelopen maand <sup>20</sup> | 10,1  | 4,8                | 7,9 10 <sup>6</sup>   |

<sup>17</sup> Bij het berekenen van de kosten van verschillende stoornissen in gelukkige levensjaren zijn we uitgegaan van de maandprevalentie van de stoornissen en de daarmee samenhangende invloed op de frequentie van gelukkige stemmingen. Vervolgens hebben we de uitkomsten uit de steekproef vertaald naar de gehele Nederlandse bevolking. Ook hebben we rekening gehouden met het feit dat ongeluk een negatieve invloed heeft op de levensduur (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005, Veenhoven, 2008). We hebben daarbij de geluksscores in drieën verdeeld. De gemiddelde groep met een score van 3 of 4 (soms of vaak gelukkig) heeft een gemiddelde levensverwachting toebedeeld gekregen, de gelukkigste groep met een score van 5 of 6 (voortdurend of meestal gelukkig) krijgt er 2,5 maand bij en de ongelukkigste groep met een score van 1 of 2 (zelden of nooit gelukkig) krijgt vijf jaar in mindering. Deze verdeling sluit grofweg aan bij de beschikbare onderzoeksresultaten.

<sup>18</sup> Het gaat hier om een fictief persoon die zijn hele leven last houdt van de stoornis. In de realiteit zijn stoornissen minder permanent en is de ziektelast verdeeld over meer personen.

<sup>19</sup> Bij de berekening is uitgegaan van een inwonertal van 16.506.031, zoals de website van het CBS vermeldde op 9 april 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Bij deze berekening is geen rekening gehouden met het feit dat het overmatig gebruik van alcohol of andere middelen een negatieve invloed heeft op de levensduur. De gegeven schatting van het verlies aan gelukkige levensjaren is daardoor aan de lage kant.

## *10.5 Positieve psychologie*

Dehue mag dan te somber zijn over de maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen in zijn geheel, maar ze heeft wel gelijk dat de mensen met stoornissen een kwetsbare groep vormen. Als we inderdaad streven naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal, dan is er veel winst te behalen als we er beter in slagen mensen met psychische stoornissen gelukkiger te maken. Bewijs dat het massaal voorschrijven van antidepressiva het geluk heeft vergroot, is niet voorhanden. Een alternatieve aanpak is dus wenselijk. Biedt het werk van Walburg dan aanknopingspunten? Kan de positieve psychologie mensen met stoornissen daadwerkelijk gelukkiger maken?

Juist bij het beantwoorden van deze vraag biedt het werk van Dehue een waarschuwing. Als haar boek over de depressie-epidemie ons iets leert, is het dat enthousiasme en ideologie alleen nog geen constructieve oplossing bieden, want het kan zomaar gebeuren dat je één miljoen mensen met een kluitje (placebo) het riet in stuurt. We moeten voordat we grote beloften doen, beter nagaan wat we daadwerkelijk voor deze groep mensen kunnen betekenen en of individueel gerichte maatregelen het meest geschikt zijn, of dat het soms misschien beter kan werken om een adequaat sociaal vangnet te bevorderen.

Er zijn drie redenen om te betwijfelen of de positieve psychologie daadwerkelijk kan waarmaken wat Walburg belooft, namelijk het mentaal vermogen van kwetsbare individuen versterken. De eerste is dat de positieve psychologie soms luchthartig grote beloftes doet. Een aardig voorbeeld komt van het boek *Gelukkig zijn kun je leren* van Martin Seligman (2002), de intellectuele vader van de positieve psychologie (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). De titel belooft meer geluk, maar in de tekst weigert Seligman tot een definitie van geluk te komen. Hij beperkt zich tot de constatering dat hij de term consistent en verantwoord gebruikt. Uit de voetnoot in het boek blijkt echter dat hij geluk op een zeer onverwachte manier gebruikt. Het is een losse aanduiding voor alle doelen van de positieve psychologie. Als iemand naar aanleiding van het boek van Seligman een bijdrage levert aan het gezinsleven of een kerkgemeenschap, dan is hij volgens de definitie van Seligman gelukkiger, ook al voelt hij zich nog precies even slecht als voorheen.

Een tweede reden is dat de positieve psychologie vooral werkt met universele oplossingen, terwijl weinig rekening gehouden wordt met de diagnose, persoonlijkheid of persoonlijke omstandigheden van de betrokkenen. Norem en Chang (2002) illustreren dit aan de hand van een discussie over optimisme. Het is verleidelijk om optimisme in alle omstandigheden te stimuleren, want er is voldoende bewijs dat optimisme leidt tot betere coping, gezondheid, tevredenheid en geluk (Scheier et al., 2001). Walburg (2008) noemt positief en 'optimistisch denken' dan ook als eerste van zes principes van duurzaam geluk. Toch kan optimisme contraproductief zijn voor mensen die angstig zijn aangelegd. Interventies die deze mensen aanleren luchtig en blijmoedig aan de toekomst te denken, kunnen hun prestaties en tevredenheid verslechteren. Voor deze specifieke doelgroep werkt defensief pessimisme beter (Norem, 2001). Dit houdt in dat mensen zichzelf onrealistisch lage doelen stellen en

veel tijd besteden aan het bedenken wat in een bepaalde situatie allemaal mis zou kunnen gaan. Hierdoor hoeven ze zich niet langer zorgen te maken dat het zal mislukken, omdat ze hier al op rekenen. Het tweede gevolg is een toename van de motivatie om de negatieve gevolgen te vermijden. Het resultaat is een grotere kans om doelen te bereiken, terwijl dat teniet gedaan zou worden door aangeleerd optimisme (Norem, 2001, 2008).

Een derde reden om aan de missie van de positieve psychologie te twifelen is dat de stroming zich afgekeerd lijkt te hebben van de doelgroep die de steun het hardst nodig heeft. Men wil zich niet met het genezen van psychische stoornissen bezighouden (Peterson, 2006), maar juist met het floreren van mensen die in de regel toch al gelukkig zijn. Dit heeft misschien als voordeel dat de psychologie een grotere afzetmarkt kan bedienen, maar het nadeel dat de hulp niet geboden wordt aan de mensen die dit het hardst nodig hebben.

Kort samengevat komt het erop neer dat de positieve psychologie het enthousiasme van de farmaceutische industrie over de eigen mogelijkheden heeft gekopieerd, en daar ook enthousiast reclame over maakt, maar het is een beetje de vraag of de beweging voldoende kritische massa heeft om te vertrouwen dat de goede bedoelingen ook uit gaan komen.

## *10.6 Conclusie*

Het idee dat de ontwikkelingen in onze maatschappij leiden tot een toename van het aantal verliezers blijkt niet te kloppen. Het gemiddeld geluksniveau stijgt en ook het aantal zeer ongelukkigen neemt af. De depressie-epidemie is geen teken dat dringende maatschappelijke hervormingen gewenst zijn, maar laat wel zien voor wie er nog een wereld is te winnen, want psychische stoornissen leiden tot een enorm verlies van gelukkige levensjaren.

Als we als maatschappij streven naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal, dan verdienen de mensen met psychische stoornissen prioriteit. Het kan daarom in theorie best de moeite waard zijn een vorm van positief psychologische hulpverlening aan te bieden die niet alleen de stoornis bestrijdt, maar tegelijkertijd het mentaal vermogen vergroot en de betrokkenen levensvaardigheden leert om positieve zaken als vriendschap, seks, vriendschap, gezondheid en een prettige vrijetijdsbesteding te kunnen bereiken.

Voorwaarde is wel dat je deze hulp pas belooft op het moment dat je hebt aangetoond dat mensen er daadwerkelijk van profiteren. Dehue waarschuwt terecht dat je mensen zou kunnen beschadigen als je hen meer controle over hun leven belooft, als zij dat niet aan kunnen of willen. Als cliënten ondanks de mooie beloften van de positieve psychologie geen grip krijgen op hun eigen leven en niet zelf goede keuzes kunnen maken, dan is het niet onredelijk meer frustraties te verwachten, evenals het moeilijker accepteren van het eigen lot. Een te blijmoedige positieve psychologie laat de mensen in de steek die hulp het hardst nodig hebben, namelijk de mensen met psychische stoornissen.



Bovendien heeft Dehue een punt als ze vraagt in hoe verre individuen bereid zijn om nog meer aan zichzelf te sleutelen. De depressie-epidemie is voor haar een teken dat we meer en meer zijn gaan geloven in het autonome individu die in alle omstandigheden het hoofd boven water moet houden. Dat de achterblijvers massaal antidepressiva zijn gaan gebruiken, wijst er echter tegelijkertijd op dat deze mensen weinig trek hebben om aan zichzelf te sleutelen. Immers de betrokkenen kiezen niet voor vaardigheidstraining, meditatie of een vorm van psychotherapie, maar dragen de verantwoordelijkheid over aan de biologische processen in hun brein die ze met een pil proberen bij te sturen.

De depressie-epidemie laat dus zowel zien dat we harder met onszelf aan de slag moeten, als dat we hierbij tegen een grens aan lopen. Walburg beveelt bijvoorbeeld iedereen een gezonde leefstijl aan, maar alle voorlichting daarover heeft niet voorkomen dat we steeds minder zijn gaan bewegen en dikker zijn geworden. Is het wel verstandig nog veel meer te vragen aan individuen? Als de positieve psychologie al veel kan betekenen voor het geluk van mensen met psychische stoornissen, dan gaat het nog heel moeilijk worden om de betrokkenen zover te krijgen dat ze de aangeboden mogelijkheden voor duurzaam geluk omarmen.

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## Positieve psychologie

### Haarlemmerolie of wondermiddel?

#### Summary

*Jan Walburg sums up interesting examples of successful positive psychology interventions that enhance happiness. I argue that the examples are very worthwhile, but that positive psychology could gain credibility by paying more attention to the limits of its possibilities. Positive psychology should make it clear who do not need help or perhaps cannot be helped, and should also investigate when quality of life can better be enhanced by non-psychological interventions.*

This chapter appeared in *Psychologie en Gezondheid*

### *11.1 Reactie op Jan Walburg*

Walburg houdt een boeiend en overtuigend pleidooi waarin hij aangeeft wat de merites zouden kunnen zijn van een psychologie die zich niet primair bezighoudt met het verhelpen met wat mis is met mensen, maar zich richt op het versterken van positieve krachten. Ik zal het meest opvallende element uit zijn betoog aanhalen. Want ik moest het drie keer lezen voordat ik in de gaten had dat Walburg niet had geschreven dat mensen met schizofrenie zich beter gaan voelen dankzij medicatie, maar dankzij meditatie. Als dergelijke oefeningen leiden tot een betere kwaliteit van leven, dan kan ik dat alleen maar toejuichen. Hetzelfde geldt voor de andere voorbeelden die hij aanhaalt.

### *11.2 Eén procent meer geluk is veel*

In grote lijnen sluit ik mij dus aan bij zijn betoog. Toch wil ik twee kanttekeningen maken. De eerste betreft een detail, het tweede gaat dieper in op de rol van de positieve psychologie. Walburg begint met de vaak herhaalde

constatering dat economische groei en geluk niet hand in hand gaan. Hij maakt zijn redenering op dit punt niet helemaal expliciet, maar meestal wordt deze constatering gebruikt om het eigen alternatief voor economische groei meer kracht bij te zetten. Het achterblijvende geluk wordt bijvoorbeeld gepresenteerd als argument voor meer duurzaamheid of eerlijker delen met ontwikkelingslanden.

Walburg verwijst met name in de Engelstalige samenvatting naar het feit dat gunstige omstandigheden lang niet altijd gelukkig maken, en lijkt te betogen dat het verstandig is meer aandacht te besteden aan de manier waarop mensen tegen de omstandigheden aankijken. De positieve psychologie – en het Trimbosinstituut – zouden hierbij een belangrijke rol kunnen spelen.

Walburg neemt hierbij een oud thema op. Toen de Nederlandse psycholoog Gerard Heymans meer dan honderd jaar geleden bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar vooruitkeek naar de toekomstige eeuw van de psychologie, constateerde hij dat de welvaart het leven tot een lange Sinterklaasavond had gemaakt. ‘Waar is de leuke

plaats, die al deze weldaden ongenoten doet wegvloeien, waar de schimmelplant die al deze zoetigheden doet verzuren, zodra we ons gereedmaken ze naar den mond te brengen?’ De psychologie zou volgens Heymans de taak krijgen deze schimmel te bestrijden en mensen meer laten genieten van het goede dat hen ten deel zou vallen. Zo gezien was Heymans onze eerste positieve psycholoog.

Het verschil is dat Walburg (2010) over geluksdata beschikt. Hij constateert dat in de periode tussen 1973 en 2005 het geluk met één procent is gestegen, terwijl de economie veel meer is gegroeid. Op zich is dit niet onjuist, maar het is de moeite waard te constateren dat dit ook niet anders kan. Zijn conclusie dat je net zo goed kunt stellen dat het geluk constant is gebleven, is daardoor twijfelachtig. De gebruikte schalen voor het meten van de groei van de economie en voor het meten van het geluk zijn immers principieel verschillend. De economie heeft een open schaal aan de bovenkant en lijkt

te kunnen blijven groeien. De bovenkant van de schaal van het geluk is echter gesloten en heeft een schaalmaximum van bijvoorbeeld tien. Als het geluk in de periode tussen 1973 en 2005 even hard was gegroeid als het bruto binnenlands product, dan zou het gemiddelde geluk nu op een schaal van 10 uitkomen op 14, terwijl de schaalmaker al heeft bepaald dat dat helemaal niet mogelijk is. De schimmel van Heymans zit dus voor een deel in het gebruikte meetinstrument. Mogelijk is het zo dat de economische groei ertoe leidt dat we onze standaard voor het optimale gelukkige leven verhogen (want dat is de tien op de schaal), en dat er achter een gelijkblijvend gelukscijfer toch meer prettige ervaringen schuilgaan.

Ik zou ook om andere redenen voorzichtig zijn met het idee dat de stijging van het geluk met één procent niet substantieel is. Walburg en ik constateren beiden dat het verhogen van het geluk van mensen met psychische stoornissen prioriteit verdient. In een eerder artikel (Bergsma, 2009) heb ik aan de hand van data van de NEMESIS-studie becijferd dat psychische stoornissen voor de Nederlandse bevolking gepaard gaan met een verlies van ruim 60 miljoen gelukkige levensjaren. Ik had echter op grond van dezelfde data ook kunnen schrijven dat het ongedaan maken van alle ongeluk dat samenhangt met psychische stoornissen zou kunnen leiden tot een stijging van het gemiddelde geluksniveau in Nederland van 2,6 procent. Als we dat de komende honderd jaar voor elkaar krijgen, dan is dat in mijn ogen een spectaculaire verbetering, waar ook Walburg enthousiast van zal worden, maar als je puur naar het getal kijkt, lijkt het misschien erg bescheiden.

### *11.3 De rol van de positieve psychologie*

In vergelijking met Walburg ben ik dus wat positiever gestemd over de ontwikkelingen in het geluksniveau in ons land. Hier staat tegenover dat ik juist wat meer reserves heb over de rol van de positieve psychologie. Walburg gedraagt zich in zijn betoog als een parelvisser, die na iedere duik weer uitroept kijk eens wat een moois de zeebodem te bieden heeft, terwijl ik al snorkelend aan de oppervlakte maar niet wil zien dat de hele zeebodem één prachtige edelsteen is. De positieve psychologie is in mijn ogen soms geneigd haar eigen hand te overspelen. Ik ken geen metastudies naar het effect van positieve psychologische interventies die mijn mening kunnen staven, maar ik heb stellig de indruk dat de resultaten van psychologische interventies zeker bij het algemene publiek in de regel bescheiden zijn. Dat is ook logisch gezien het feit dat de niveaus van welbevinden gemiddeld al hoog zijn in rijke industriële samenlevingen.

Toch lijkt de positieve psychologie vaak iedereen een zelfverbeteringsprogramma aan te willen bieden. De socioloog Ruut Veenhoven maakte daarom in een interview met de Volkskrant (Bergsma, 2008) de vergelijking tussen de aanbieders van gelukscursussen en van haarlemmerolie: ‘Ze doen net alsof hun aanbevelingen passen op alle kwalen. Toch heb je meer kans op succes als je aan kunt sluiten bij de individuele situatie van mensen. Als je een neurotische weduwe bent met één been en je geeft een zes voor je eigen levensgeluk, dan doe je het eigenlijk prima. Als je

hetzelfde cijfer geeft voor je geluk, terwijl verder alles meezit, dan is er waarschijnlijk meer ruimte voor verbetering. Dan is advies over levenskunst veel beter op zijn plaats.'

Dit soort kritiek kreeg ik zelf ook, toen ik de positief psychologische gelukscursus van de Amerikaanse psycholoog Michael Fordyce (1977, 1983) met zijn toestemming heb bewerkt voor de lezers van de Volkskrant. Dit leverde soms positieve reacties op, maar ook regelmatig negatieve. 'Wees actief', was een van de levenslessen die de lezers werd aangeboden, omdat actieve mensen gelukkiger zijn dan inactieve, en omdat dit advies werkzaam is gebleken. Websitebezoeker Skylo 10 concludeert echter: 'Ik haal het beste uit mijn leven, doe voor 99 procent alleen maar dingen die ik boeiend, leerzaam, vruchtbaar, zinvol en leuk vind. En nu zou ik nóg meer 'moeten' gaan doen om prettiger te leven? Nou... Nee!!!! Juist de balans van actief en rust is voor mij belangrijk.' En nu heb ik iemand uitgekozen die de mening genuanceerd naar voren bracht.

De uitdaging voor de positieve psychologie is in mijn ogen dus niet alleen om aan te tonen dat het soms mogelijk is positieve resultaten te bereiken, zoals Walburg overtuigend laat zien, maar ook om duidelijker te krijgen wat voor wie werkt. En even belangrijk is de vraag wie je beter niet kan lastigvallen met psychologische interventies, omdat de ruimte voor verbetering niet groot genoeg is. In de praktijk meen ik waar te nemen dat deze laatste twee vragen onvoldoende aandacht krijgen en dit kan in de toekomst de geloofwaardigheid van de positief psychologische beweging in gevaar brengen, waardoor misschien ook de pareltjes van Walburg verloren gaan.

Ook bestaat het risico dat een eenzijdige nadruk op positief psychologische interventies ertoe leidt dat andere mogelijkheden om de kwaliteit van leven te verbeteren onderbelicht blijven. Veenhoven opperde in het eerdergenoemde interview met de Volkskrant bijvoorbeeld dat het mogelijk zou zijn mensen beter te informeren over levenskeuzen. Veenhoven zei toen: 'Een aardig voorbeeld komt van onderzoek naar mensen die een baan verder van huis accepteerden, omdat ze daarmee meer gingen verdienen. Veel van die mensen bleken door die keuze uiteindelijk minder gelukkig te zijn geworden. Als we nu eens een soort consumentenbond voor het geluk zouden kunnen opzetten, waarin mensen kunnen nazoeken welke gevolgen dergelijke keuzen hebben, dan zouden ze beter geïnformeerd kunnen kiezen, en misschien vaker terecht komen in gelukkige omstandigheden.' Dergelijke hulp bij levenskeuzen lijkt vooral ook handig te zijn, omdat uit onderzoek is gebleken dat mensen vaak erg slecht zijn in het voorspellen wat de emotionele gevolgen zijn van de keuzen die zij maken (Gilbert, 2006).

Een tweede mogelijkheid, waar op dit moment aan de Erasmus Universiteit mee wordt geëxperimenteerd, is mensen te helpen zelf oplossingen te vinden om hun kwaliteit van leven te vergroten door hen te helpen hun eigen gevoelsleven beter in kaart te brengen. Dat gebeurt op de website [www.gelukswijzer.nl](http://www.gelukswijzer.nl) met behulp van een elektronisch dagboekje. Daaruit kan bijvoorbeeld blijken dat iemand zich meestal prettiger voelt als hij of zij de vorige avond gesport heeft en niet voor de tv is blijven hangen. Het kan ook blijken dat iemand zich op het werk meestal prettiger voelt dan gedacht. Dat soort informatie helpt om beter geïnformeerde keuzen te maken in het



leven. Maar bij ook bij deze mogelijkheid moet aangetekend worden dat de werkzaamheid nog niet is aangetoond en dat niet iedereen er baat bij zal hebben.

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# THE HAPPINESS OF PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL DISORDER IN MODERN SOCIETY

## Summary

*Richard Layard (2005) holds modern society responsible for an 'epidemic of mental disorder', which he sees as a major source of contemporary unhappiness. Yet average happiness is high in modern society and most people with a mental disorder feel happy most of the time. This appears in an analysis of a representative sample (N = 7076) of the Dutch population that was screened for mental disorders. Happiness was measured using a single question on how often respondents had felt happy during the last four weeks. Of the respondents with a mental disorder 68% reported they had felt often happy during the last four weeks. People with mental disorder may be victims of modern society, but they also benefit from modern society.*

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‘Mental health is now our biggest social problem - bigger than unemployment and bigger than poverty,’ said Lord Richard Layard, in the Guardian September 12 2005 . Layard is an emeritus professor in economics and a Downing Street adviser in the UK. He was trying to persuade the government to train an army of psychotherapists.

In his influential 2005 book *Happiness: lessons of a new science* Layard marks mental disorder as a major source of unhappiness in modern society. For that reason he pleads for investment in curing mental disorders and to put more effort in preventing the occurrence of mental disorders. In his view prevention should not only involve interventions at the individual level, but also social reform. Societal determinants of mental disorders are part and parcel of modern market economies. Modern societies overlook key facts of human nature (Layard, 2005). In this line he states we should tame the rat race and dampen the pressures of modernization, because of the ‘crippling distress’ involved. Layard is not the only one who holds modern society responsible for what is called the ‘epidemic of mental disorders’. An early advocate of this view was Thomas Scheff (1974) and among the current supporters are reputed social scientists such as Lane (2000) and Wilkenson and Marmot (2003).

In this commentary two aspects of Layard’s claims are scrutinized. Is mental disorder really such a big problem? And: Is Layard right that human nature does not flourish in modern market economies?

### *12.1 Mental disorder is not synonymous with unhappiness*

How can we reconcile Layard’s misery statistics with the fact that most people in modern countries report to be happy? Headey and Wearing (1992) show that suffering is not the opposite of happiness. They grouped people on two dimensions that are called ‘well-being’ and ‘ill-being’. It is no surprise that a lot of people score high on well-being and low on ill-being, while a small group combines high ill-being with low well-being. Yet, there is also a substantive group that is not distressed, although they lack positive well-being and also group of people who are highly distressed and nevertheless experience high well-being.

Aspects of well-being, such as satisfaction with life, positive moods, happiness and meaning in life, appear to be closely linked and seem to have a common genetic basis (Bartels & Boomsma, 2009). The same is true for aspects of ill-being. Depressive symptoms, anxiety and low moods are highly interconnected as well. However the well-being cluster only shows a moderate negative correlation with ill-being cluster. Emotional experience can be mixed (e.g. Carstensen et al, 2000; Ersner-Hershfield, 2008).

The conclusion is that we should be careful to equate mental disorders with unhappiness. This also becomes apparent if we look at the results of the Dutch NEMESIS study (Bijl, Van Zessen et al., 1998). A representative sample of 7076 adults aged 18 to 64 years was interviewed three times and diagnosed for mental disorders by trained interviewers with the help of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) developed by the World Health Organization (Robins et

al, 1988). They also answered a question on how happy they had been during the last four weeks, with response options ranging from 'never' (1) to 'continuously' (6). As expected, people diagnosed as having a mental disorder reported to have felt happy less often than those without; the average score for people with disorders being 4,2 and for people without disorders 4,9. The average difference is 18% of the scale range (Bergsma, Ten Have et al, in press).

**Figure 1**

Responses to the question 'How often did you feel happy in the past four weeks' by people with and without mental disorder

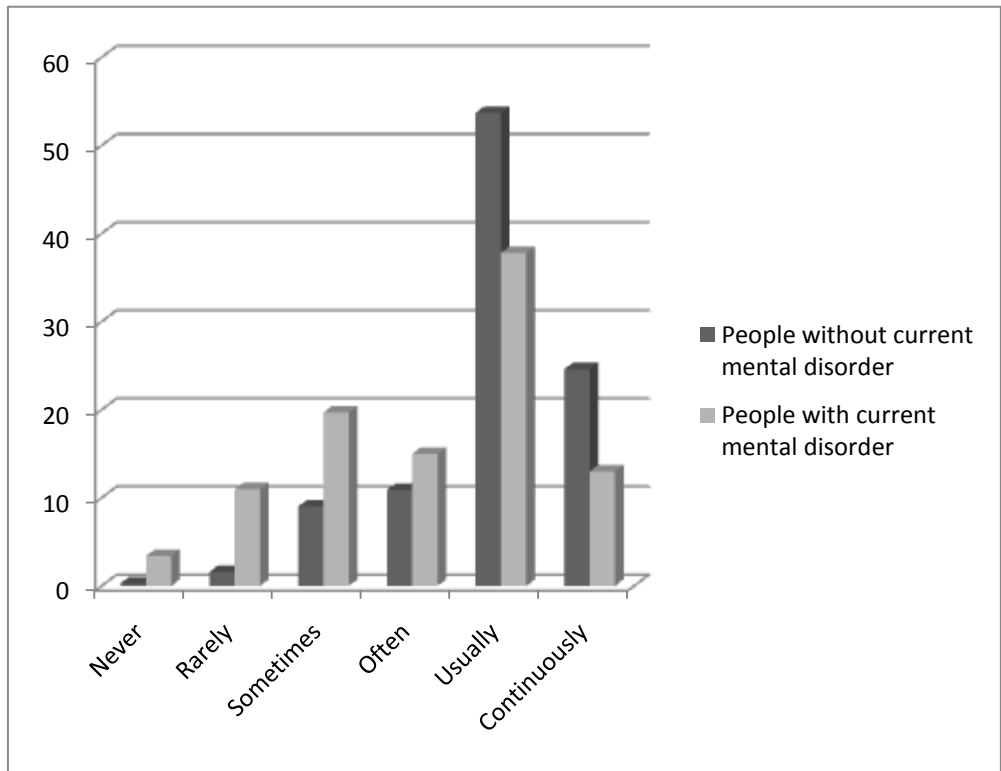


Figure 1 shows the distribution of happy moods among people with and without mental disorder. It is apparent that the difference between the two groups is more pronounced on the negative side of the happiness continuum than on the positive side. 57.7 % Of the people who never or rarely felt happy during the past four weeks suffered from a mental disorder and an additional 26.9 % had a history of a mental disorder. We also mention lifetime prevalence because psychopathology is associated

with the residual functional disability when a disorder is cured or in remission (Bijl & Ravelli, 2000).

**Figure 2**  
% of people with a mental disorders that felt happy during the past four weeks.

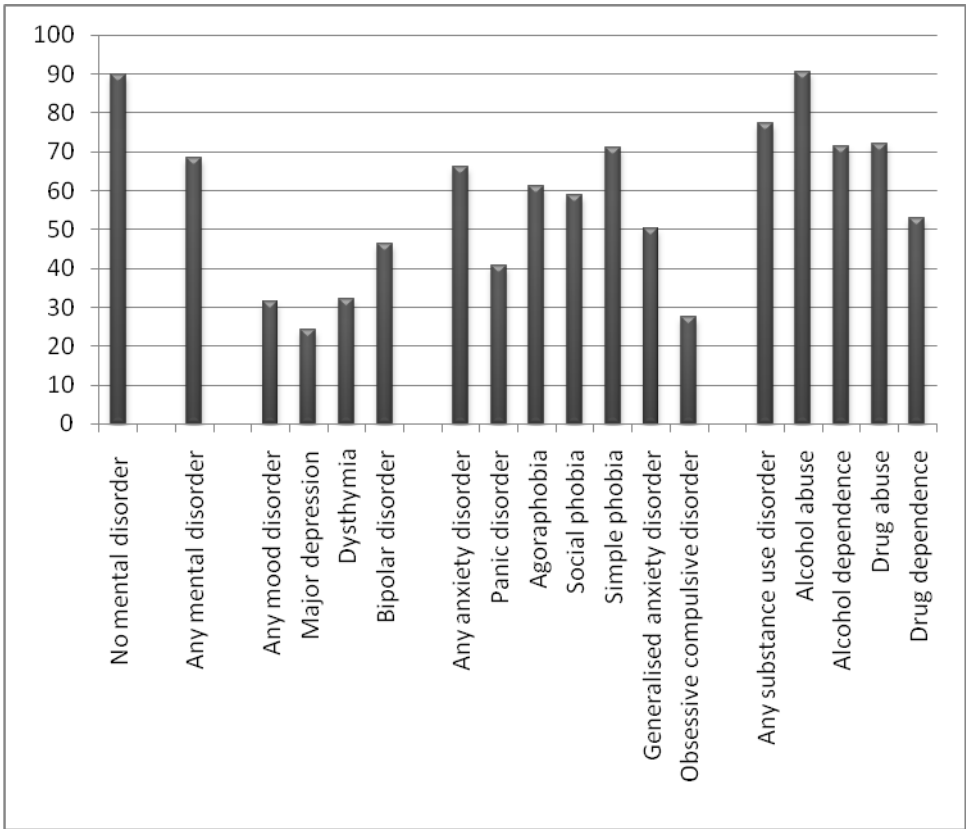


Figure 2 provides more detail about the kinds of mental disorders involved. A first thing that stands out is that people diagnosed as having an alcohol problem are no less happy than people diagnosed as not having any disorder. Another noteworthy thing is that the percentage of people with anxiety disorders that feel at least often happy goes up to 80 if we exclude people with co-morbid mood disorders from our sample. This figure is hard to align with the ‘crippling distress’ Layard mentions. There is more suffering among people diagnosed as depressed, but even in this category some 30% reports to have felt happy in the last four weeks.

*12.2 Why are people with mental disorders happy often?*

The fact that so many depressed people feel happy often is surprising. One possible explanation is that these people were misguided or not honest about their happiness. However, the data do not support this explanation. Happiness of people with and without mental disorders turns out to be associated in the same way with other indicators of wellbeing. People with mental disorders who feel happy most of the time are less absent from work, use health care facilities less often, and use less pain medication than people with mental disorders who feel happy less often. Disturbed but happy people also function better psychologically, they are less neurotic, have better self-esteem, higher energy levels and a more relaxed attitude, than people with mental disorders who are less happy (Bergsma, Veenhoven et al, in press).

This leads to a somewhat paradoxical conclusion that people with mental disorders are happy if they have the characteristics that are usually associated with good mental health. This conclusion goes well with the idea put forward by Horwitz and Wakefield (2006) that the high levels of mental disorders in the general population may be a survey artifact. A lot of people that are diagnosed as having a mental disorder, will have symptoms of mental disorders, but may still be quite able to cope, and consequently feel happy most of the time.

Another thing to keep in mind is that modern society appears to fit human nature fairly well. A look in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2010a) learns that most people are happy most of the time, and that the level of happiness is particularly high in modern western nations. Average happiness on scale 0-10 is 7,4 in the USA and no less than 8,4 in Denmark. We live now longer and happier than ever before in human history (Veenhoven 2010b).

How about the ‘rampant individualism’ that Layard holds responsible for the ‘crippling distress’? Research shows that people live happier in individualistic society (Veenhoven 1999) and one of the reasons is probably that individualism enhances the chance that one leads a life that fits one’s preferences and capacities. How about the modern time stress? Research shows that people tend to be happier in countries where the pace of life is high (Garhammer 2002) and one of the reasons seems to be that such societies appeal more to the human need for challenge.

Even if modern society causes mental disorder (which is not sure), its victims still enjoy its benefits. Like other citizens, people with mental disorders can count on good health care, freedom of choice and the protection of the constitutional state.

### *12.3 Why is mental disorder still the main cause of unhappiness?*

Still Layard is right in that mental disorder is a main source of unhappiness in modern society. How can that be? One reason is that modern society has eliminated a lot of traditional sources of unhappiness, such as hunger, oppression and sexual abstinence. The better the external living conditions in society, the more the remaining differences in happiness depend on inner life ability. As a result, the negative effects of mental disorder will catch the eye more in modern society. Possibly modern society

sets also higher demands to mental health, because of its greater demands on self-direction .

Layard is also right in that mental disorders form a huge social problem, that should be addressed with priority. Yet the medicine he recommends seems to be worse than the disease.



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## **Deel 3**

### **De grenzen van het utilitarisme**



## **Self-Reported Wisdom and Happiness:**

### **An Empirical Investigation**

#### **Summary**

*Possible tensions between wisdom and happiness have been extensively debated in philosophy. Some regard wisdom as the 'supreme part of happiness', whereas others think that a more accurate and wiser view on reality might reduce happiness. Analyzing a Dutch internet survey of 7037 respondents, we discovered that wisdom and happiness were modestly positively related. Wisdom, measured with the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS), explained 9.2% of the variation in hedonic happiness. The correlation with the reflective dimension of wisdom was the strongest. In addition, wisdom was more important for happiness among adults with only an elementary education. Our results suggest that happiness and wisdom do not conflict.*

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*The thought that the enjoyment of reality is good in itself is already embodied in the wisdom of the Talmud; it states that everybody has to justify himself in the life hereafter for every failure to enjoy a legitimately offered pleasure in this world.*

Marie Jahoda (1958)

We seek happiness for the sake of itself, but we choose virtues such as honour and reason not only for their sakes, but also for the sake of happiness. Aristotle (350 B.C.E.) wrote these famous words in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. He concluded that happiness is the ultimate goal. Yet, his concept of happiness is not strictly hedonic. It has clear elements of eudaimonic well-being (Franklin, 2010). For Aristotle, happiness is acting virtuously and feeling good because of that (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Bentham (1789 [1970]) took Aristotle's idea about the ultimate goal and gave it a psychological twist by using a restricted definition of happiness as the sum of pleasures minus pains. His moral philosophy is based on the idea that we should seek the greatest hedonic happiness for the greatest number of people. This idea has remained influential. For example, the modern scholar Tal Ben-Shahar (2007) refers to happiness as the 'ultimate currency', and reasoning about ultimate happiness is gaining momentum in society. Several sociologists, economists, and politicians state that traditional socioeconomic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are measuring means rather than ends. By contrast, Gross National Happiness is used as a goal for development in Bhutan (Priesner, 1999). In the West, the same idea is propagated by noted scholars, such as Kahneman, Wakker, and Sarin (1997) and Layard (2005), who argue that the promotion of happiness could be used to guide government decisions.

Although this line of reasoning has gained prominence in the last decade (Veenhoven, 2004), the idea about an ultimate currency is still under debate. A major objection is that hedonic happiness is not sufficient to assess whether people are faring well (Ryff, 1989). One issue in the debate is whether growing wiser is more desirable than being happy and whether the attainment of wisdom might be accompanied by distress (Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005). We approach this issue empirically by assessing both happiness and wisdom in a Dutch internet survey of 7037 respondents.

We start with a discussion of the elusive constructs of happiness and wisdom, followed by a short philosophical exposé of the presumed relation between happiness and wisdom and how these concepts fit into the recent psychological debate about the relative importance of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. We then summarize earlier empirical research on the association between wisdom and happiness before we present our own findings.

### *13.1 Defining Happiness*

In a broad sense, the word happiness is used for 'quality of life' or 'well-being', denoting that life is good but without specifying what is good about life. Veenhoven

(2004) has charted the different meanings conveyed by the term, using a classification scheme of four qualities of life (see Table 1). This classification is based on two distinctions: Vertically there is a difference between *opportunities* for a good life and actual *outcomes* of life. The distinction is important, because people can fail to use the life chances offered to them. The horizontal distinction refers to *external* qualities of the environment and *internal* qualities of the individual. Together, these two dichotomies produce four qualities of life, which have all been denoted by the word ‘happiness’.

**Table 1** Four Qualities of Life

|                     | External Life Qualities   | Internal Life Qualities    |
|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Life Chances</b> | Livability of environment | Life-ability of the person |
| <b>Life Results</b> | Utility of life           | Satisfaction with life     |

The upper left quadrant (*livability of the environment*) represents good living conditions, such as material affluence, schooling, political freedom, and social equality, which raise the chances of people feeling good about their lives. The upper right quadrant (*life-ability of the person*) denotes how well an individual is able to seize opportunities and to cope with the problems of life. Good life-ability gives individuals the possibility to make the best of different circumstances. The bottom left quadrant (*utility of life*) represents the notion that a good life must serve some higher function, such as ecological preservation, virtue, or cultural development. Gerson (1976, p. 795) referred to this variant as ‘transcendental’ conceptions of quality of life. The combination of life-ability of the person and the utility of life is similar to Ryff’s (1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) concept of psychological well-being, which consists of environmental mastery, autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, and purpose in life. Finally, the bottom right quadrant (denoted by *satisfaction with life*) describes the internal appreciation of one’s life. This latter definition is most closely associated to Bentham’s (1789 [1970]) view of happiness as the sum of pleasures minus pains, although we realize that there is a difference between life satisfaction and happiness. If happiness is affected by daily pleasures and pains, it is likely that it is less stable than an overall feeling of satisfaction with life, which is based on comparisons between past aspirations and present achievements (Fisher, 1992; George & Bearon, 1980).

In this paper, we follow Bentham’s definition of happiness as the affective appreciation of one’s life. We measured happiness with self-reports and asked participants to rate how happy they have felt in the last three months and today.

### 13.2 Defining Wisdom

Although wisdom is a complex concept and difficult to define (Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005), historically it has been considered the pinnacle of human development (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). For example, Kunzmann (2004, p. 504) described wisdom as ‘... a perfect, perhaps utopian, integration of knowledge and character, of mind and virtue.’ Wise people presumably possess many positive qualities, such as a mature and integrated personality, superior judgment skills in difficult life matters, and the ability to cope with the vicissitudes of life (e.g., Ardel, 2004).

Unfortunately, even after three decades of contemporary wisdom research, a generally agreed upon definition of this elusive concept does not exist. Meeks and Jeste (2009) analyzed 10 major definitions and descriptions of wisdom and found that six subcomponents were included in at least three of these definitions: (1) prosocial attitudes/behaviors, (2) social decision making/pragmatic knowledge of life, (3) emotional homeostasis, (4) reflection/self-understanding, (5) value relativism/tolerance and (6) acknowledgement of and dealing with uncertainty/ambiguity. In this study, we define and operationalize wisdom as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and compassionate personality characteristics. Our measure is based on prior research by Clayton and Birren (1980) and further developed by Ardel (1997, 2003, 2004). This general, yet relatively parsimonious description of wisdom seems to be compatible with most of the definitions found in the ancient and contemporary wisdom literature (Ardelt, 2011; Ardel & Oh, 2010; Manheimer, 1992) and is also distinct enough to distinguish a wise person from, for example, an intelligent, creative, or altruistic individual (Ardelt, 2004).

**Table 2** Definition and Operationalization of Wisdom as a Three-Dimensional Personality Characteristic

| Dimension | Definition  | Operationalization  |
|-----------|---|---|
| Cognitive | An understanding of life and a desire to know the truth, i.e., to comprehend the significance and deeper meaning of phenomena and events, particularly with regard to intra- and interpersonal matters. Includes knowledge and acceptance of the positive and negative aspects of human | Items or ratings assess the ability and willingness to understand a situation or phenomenon thoroughly; knowledge of the positive and negative aspects of human nature; acknowledgement of ambiguity and uncertainty in life; |



|                      |   |   |
|----------------------|---|---|
|                      | nature, of the inherent limits of knowledge, and of life's unpredictability and uncertainties   | the ability to make important decisions despite life's unpredictability and uncertainties   |
| <b>Reflective</b>    | <p>A perception of phenomena and events from multiple perspectives.</p> <p>Requires self-examination, self-awareness, and self-insight.</p>                                     | <p>Items or ratings assess the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives the absence of subjectivity and projections (i.e., the tendency to blame other people or circumstances for one's own situation or feelings).</p> |
| <b>Compassionate</b> | <p>All-encompassing sympathetic and compassionate love accompanied by a motivation to foster the well-being of all.</p> <p>Requires the transcendence of self-centeredness.</p> | <p>Items or ratings assess the presence of positive, caring, and nurturant emotions and behavior toward others; the absence of indifferent or negative emotions and behavior toward others.</p>   |

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Adapted from Ardel, M. (2004). Wisdom as expert knowledge system: A critical review of a contemporary operationalization of an ancient concept. *Human Development*, 47, 257-285.

As summarized in Table 2, the *cognitive* dimension of wisdom refers to the desire to know the truth. This does not only imply a knowledge of facts but also a deep understanding of life, particularly with regard to intrapersonal and interpersonal matters, including knowledge and acceptance of the positive and negative aspects of human nature, of the inherent limits of knowledge, and of life's unpredictability and uncertainties (Ardelt, 2000; Brugman, 2000; Kekes, 1983). A deep and undistorted comprehension of reality can only be achieved by overcoming one's subjectivity and projections through the practice of (self-)reflection (Kekes, 1995). The *reflective* dimension of wisdom highlights this aspect and represents the ability and willingness to invest in self-examination, self-awareness and self-insight. It requires the perception of phenomena and events from different perspectives and the ability to 'see through illusions' (McKee & Barber, 1999). According to Kramer (1990, p. 296), 'one must be able to first become aware of and then transcend one's projections before one can develop both the empathic skills and the cognitive processes associated with wisdom'.

Reflectivity tends to reduce self-centeredness, which leads to a deeper understanding of one's own and others' motives and behavior, and is likely to result in greater sympathetic and compassionate love for others. All-encompassing sympathetic and compassionate love accompanied by a motivation to foster the well-being of all denotes the *compassionate* component of wisdom (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Levitt, 1999; Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

It should be noted that this definition of wisdom does not imply that wise individuals will avoid or suppress negative emotions toward themselves or others if they arise. On the contrary, through self-awareness and self-examination (the reflective wisdom dimension) wise persons are able to acknowledge, regulate, and ultimately overcome their negative emotions and projections without adversely affecting their own lives and that of others (Webster, 2003). For example, the practice of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation appear to facilitate the acceptance and eventual transcendence of negative emotions and behavior (Barbieri, 1997; Farb et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Specia, Carlson, Goodey, & Angen, 2000). As defined in the present study, wisdom has a utopian quality, but it should be possible to assess how close people come to this ideal state (Ardelt, 2004).

### *13.3 Wisdom and Happiness in Philosophy*

It is not hard to find supporters of the idea that wisdom is important for happiness in the history of philosophy. Thomas Aquinas (1923, p. 3) wrote, 'Of all human pursuits, that of wisdom is the most perfect, the most sublime, the most profitable, the most delightful.' The profession of philosophical counseling, which uses philosophical means for treating everyday problems and predicaments, is partly based on this idea. Marinoff (2003) argued that philosophizing about life helps people to develop the practical wisdom that enables them to deal with life more efficiently. His motto is the following quote by Epicure: 'Vain is the word of the philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, there is no profit in philosophy either if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.'

Still, the idea that wisdom leads to happiness is controversial. We can feel better without growing in wisdom, as exemplified by the use of psychotropic medication and behavioral therapy that employs basic learning mechanisms. Moreover, Amir (2004) stated that studying philosophy sometimes leads to confusion or discouragement and that the search for wisdom through philosophical counseling might contribute to unhappiness. It can be very frustrating to acquire a better understanding of one's predicament if one does not have the means to resolve it. Hence, wisdom or greater insight might harm happiness.

In philosophy, wisdom is not only seen as a life-ability that might enhance happiness, but as a goal in itself and as such, wisdom might conflict with happiness by, first, increasing one's insight into life and, second, through the realization that other things might be more important than the pursuit of happiness. To illustrate the first

downside of wisdom, Feldman (2008, p. 231) used the example of ‘Timmy’ who is always cheerful with all the happiness neurotransmitters flowing around in his brain. He never thinks about a life goal, however, and when he is prompted to review his life in this light he ‘promptly becomes despondent and would judge his life as a whole to have been worthless’. A grain of wisdom has made Timmy unhappy. This possibility is summed up by the popular expression ‘sadder but wiser’. Happiness appears to profit from embracing (unwise) positive illusions about the relative superiority of ourselves (Headey & Wearing, 1992). Without positive illusions, we run an elevated risk for depression. The phenomenon called depressive realism describes the tendency of mildly depressed people to view themselves and the world realistically (Collijn, 1991).

Second, if wisdom encourages us to transcend our self-interests, we might choose options in life that are detrimental to happiness. According to Buss (2004), sometimes it is wiser to resist oppression and to do what is right, even if it involves sacrificing our happiness, than to go along with a harmful social system. For example, Mohr (1992) argued that dignity for homosexuals takes preference over their feelings of happiness and that coming out is a form of ‘community duty’ that might help improve the position of homosexuals in the long run. These philosophers deem it wise to sacrifice individual happiness for the sake of the greater good. Yet, paradoxically, the pursuit of altruistic and virtuous goals might ultimately lead to greater and longer lasting happiness than the direct pursuit of sensory pleasures (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

### *13.4 Personal Adjustment versus Growth*

Psychologists distinguish between hedonic or subjective well-being, such as happiness, and eudaimonic or psychological well-being, which refers to the actualization of human potentials, such as growth in wisdom (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993). According to Staudinger and Kunzmann (2005), personal adjustment, described as positive developmental changes that have adaptive value for the individual as well as the community, is likely accompanied by subjective well-being. Adjustment entails ‘that we become self-assured and self-protected, which help us to avert “damage” from our view of the world and ourselves’ (p. 326). Yet, personal growth and wisdom transcend the given societal circumstances and go beyond integration in social structures and the maintenance of subjective well-being. Growth is characterized by ‘increases in virtues such as insight, integrity, self-transcendence, and the striving towards wisdom’ (p.321). The attainment of wisdom, in turn, requires critical self-examination, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and ‘extraordinary effort and most likely pain’ (p. 326). Moreover, sometimes adverse life circumstances foster the development of wisdom (Ardelt, 1998; Ardel, Landes, & Vaillant, 2010). This does not imply, however, that wisdom is inversely related to happiness, although the path to wisdom might necessitate hard work, self-discipline, and endurance (Pascual-Leone, 2000). For example, for Erikson (1982), wisdom is the virtue that results after the resolution of the psychosocial crisis of ego integrity versus despair in old age. Wise people know how to cope with crises and hardships in life and to sustain their

emotional well-being even in difficult circumstances (Ardelt, 1997, 2005). Also, assuming that a certain degree of personal adjustment is necessary to develop wisdom (Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005), wise persons will have a higher starting point of happiness than individuals who have difficulties adjusting to life.

If it is true, as many wisdom researchers have argued, that wise individuals know ‘the art of living’ or how to live a life that is good for oneself, good for others, and good for the whole society (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Kekes, 1995; Kramer, 2000; Kupperman, 2005; Sternberg, 1998), they should also be content and satisfied with a life that is well lived (Ardelt, 2000; Bianchi, 1994; Clayton, 1982; Vaillant, 2002). In fact, Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura (2005) argued that the pursuit and attainment of wisdom might be intrinsically rewarding and joyful due to the transcendence of one’s self-centeredness. Happiness is not a zero sum game, and one of the best ways to become happy appears to be by contributing to the happiness of others (Headey & Wearing, 1992).

Wisdom might also be necessary to make happiness sustainable (Bergsma, 2000). Kraut (cited in Averill & More, 1993) offers the following thought experiment to illustrate this point. Imagine you are still in high school and voted the most popular student by your peers. You are elated because of this well-deserved recognition, but afterwards you discover it was a cruel hoax: in reality you are the laughing stock of the school. The happiness you felt on the evening of the election is not something to think back of with gratitude. We want to be happy, but we need wisdom to shield us against painful illusions. In fact, happiness without wisdom might be short-sighted. In *Bright-sided: How the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) argued that being wiser and more in contact with reality might be hard at times but on average would make everybody happier in the long run.

### *13.5 Empirical Research on the Association between Wisdom and Happiness*

To our knowledge, only two studies have examined the relation between wisdom and happiness per se, although a number of studies have analyzed the association between wisdom and measures of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction. The empirical evidence is mixed, with some studies finding a positive association between measures of wisdom and well-being and others failing to do so.

In a sample of 158 Canadian undergraduates, self-transcendent wisdom (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005) was positively related to the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), even after controlling for self-actualization (Beaumont, 2009). Similarly, in a sample of 177 undergraduate students from the United States, the reflective and compassionate components of the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) correlated directly with the Subjective Happiness Scale and inversely with negative affect, although the cognitive dimension of the 3D-WS was uncorrelated with both scales (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

In addition to happiness, wisdom has been found to be positively associated with measures of subjective well-being. For example, in studies of economically diverse

community samples of primarily older White adults ( $M = 64$  years) and White and African American older adults ( $M = 71$  years) wisdom, also assessed by the 3D-WS, was positively correlated with life satisfaction (Le, in press) and general well-being and negatively related to depressive symptoms (Ardelt, 2003). Similarly, in an educational diverse sample of White older women ( $M = 68$  years) and men ( $M = 70$  years), wisdom, measured as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and compassionate personality characteristics from the California Q-Sort and Haan's (1969) Ego Rating Scale, had a stronger statistical effect on life satisfaction than objective indicators of quality of life, such as physical health, socioeconomic status, financial situation, physical environment, and social involvement (Ardelt, 1997).

In a sample of middle-aged (36 to 59 years;  $M = 45$  years) and older (age  $> 65$ ;  $M = 70$  years) American and Japanese adults, both the reflective and compassionate synthetic wisdom mode and the cognitive analytical wisdom mode were positively associated with life satisfaction (Takahashi & Overton, 2002). General wisdom-related knowledge, measured by the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (e.g., Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995) was also positively correlated with life satisfaction in a German sample of relatively highly educated younger adults ( $M = 30$  years) and older adults ( $M = 67$  years), whereas personal wisdom, assessed as self-knowledge, growth and self-regulation, interrelating the self, self-relativism, and tolerance of ambiguity, was unrelated to life satisfaction (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Yet, in a different study by Kunzmann and Baltes (2003) with an educational diverse German sample ranging in age from 15 to 70 years, general wisdom-related knowledge was inversely correlated with both positive/pleasant affect (e.g., exuberant, happy, proud) and negative affect (e.g., angry, afraid, ashamed). Although wise individuals might be more likely to be happy, they might be less likely to be exuberant or proud due to emotion regulation (Webster, 2003) and the transcendence of the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005).

Brugman (2000) who operationalized wisdom as expertise in uncertainty measured by the Epistemic Cognition Questionnaire (ECQ15) also obtained contradictory results. In a sample of highly educated older adults in the Netherlands ( $M = 74$  years), wisdom was unrelated to life satisfaction, but the ECQ15 correlated with life satisfaction in an educational diverse sample of middle-aged ( $M = 50$  years) and older ( $M = 83$  years) Dutch participants (Brugman, 2000). Finally, in a sample of college-educated adults around the age of 52, neither practical wisdom (assessed by cognitive, reflective, and mature adjectives from the Adjective Check List) nor transcendent wisdom (ratings of respondents' examples of their own wisdom) was significantly correlated with life satisfaction or marital satisfaction (Wink & Helson, 1997).

It is conceivable that the contradictory empirical findings are due to the different measures of wisdom and subjective well-being as studies vary widely in the operationalization of these elusive constructs. Another possibility is that wisdom is more strongly related to subjective well-being among socially and economically disadvantaged respondents, such as women, minorities, elders, and individuals with a lower educational background, who have fewer resources to find fulfillment,

satisfaction, and happiness in the external environment. For example, it is noteworthy that only the two studies with highly educated middle-aged and older adult samples did not find a significant association between measures of wisdom and satisfaction (Brugman, 2000; Wink & Helson, 1997). Wisdom might be unrelated to well-being and happiness if external life qualities, life chances, and life results are optimal (see Table 1), but it might be necessary for greater well-being and happiness if external life qualities are problematic and economic and physical resources are not available or are declining (Ardelt, 2000; Clayton, 1982; Kekes, 1995). It is easier to be happy when everything goes well than when life is hard. In difficult circumstances, better coping skills and wisdom might be needed to remain happy.

### *13.6 The Present Study*

The present study seeks to explore the association between wisdom and feelings of hedonic happiness, using a Dutch internet sample, by testing the following hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 1:* Wisdom and happiness are moderately positively related, even after controlling for sex, age, and educational attainment.

Wise people know how to cope with the pains in life and enjoy its pleasures, although they might be more aware of life's negative aspects through their ability to see through illusions (McKee & Barber, 1999; Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005). Yet, it was not expected that high wisdom scorers were less happy than those with lower wisdom scores. To test for this possibility, we analyzed whether the association between wisdom and happiness was curvilinear.

*Hypothesis 2:* If wisdom is more important for happiness in difficult circumstances, the correlation between wisdom and happiness will be stronger for women than men, older adults than younger and middle-aged adults, and individuals with lower rather than greater educational attainment.

### *13.7 Method*

#### *13.7.1 Procedure*

On January 31, 2009, *De Volkskrant*, a national newspaper in The Netherlands, published several opinion pieces on wisdom and offered their readers the opportunity to take an on-line 'wisdom test.' At the website, readers had the option to fill out a standardized on-line survey consisting of the 39 items of the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (Ardelt, 2003). After responding to the items, they were asked whether they wanted to receive feedback on their 'wisdom score' immediately or were willing to participate in a study and answer five additional questions about their age, gender, education, and happiness. Readers either clicked on a button labeled 'Yes, include my answers in the study' or 'No, do not include my answers in the study.' If they clicked

on the 'Yes' button, they were asked about their age, gender, level of education, and their current and past happiness. After submitting those answers, participants received their average scores for the cognitive, reflective, and compassionate dimensions of wisdom and their overall wisdom score. If readers clicked on the 'No' button instead, they received their average wisdom scores immediately. General interpretations of scores below the midpoint of the 1-5 scales (a score of  $< 3$ ), slightly above the midpoint (a score between 3 and  $< 4$ ), and in the top of the scale (a score between 4 and 5) were provided by De Volkskrant.

### 13.7.2 Measures

#### 13.7.2.1 Happiness

Happiness was measured by two single questions ('How happy do you feel today?' and 'All considering, how happy have you felt in the last three months?') on a scale ranging from 0 (very unhappy) to 9 (very happy). The correlation between the two items was .58 ( $p < .001$ ). Single item happiness measures have been shown to have good concurrent and convergent validity and seem to be reliable, valid, and viable in community surveys (Abdel-Khalek, 2006).

#### 13.7.2.2 Wisdom

Wisdom was assessed by the cognitive, reflective, and compassionate dimensions of the 3D-WS (see Table 2). The 14 items of the cognitive dimension were all worded negatively, measuring an inability or unwillingness to understand a situation or phenomenon thoroughly (e.g., 'Ignorance is bliss'), a tendency to see the world as either black or white (e.g., 'People are either good or bad'), an unawareness of ambiguity and uncertainty in life (e.g., 'There is only one right way to do anything'), and an inability to make important decision despite life's unpredictability and uncertainties ('I am hesitant about making important decisions after thinking about them'). The 12 items of the reflective wisdom dimension assessed the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives (e.g., 'I always try to look at all sides of a problem') and the absence of subjectivity and projections (e.g., 'Things often go wrong for me by no fault of my own' – reversed). The 13 items of the compassionate wisdom dimension gauged the presence of positive, caring, and nurturant emotions and behavior (e.g., 'Sometimes I feel a real compassion for everyone'), including the motivation to foster the well-being of others (e.g., 'If I see people in need, I try to help them one way or another'), and the absence of indifferent or negative emotions and behavior toward others (e.g., 'I am annoyed by unhappy people who just feel sorry for themselves' – reversed).

All items were assessed on two 5-point scales, ranging either from 1 ('strongly agree') to 5 ('strongly disagree') or from 1 ('definitely true of myself') to 5 ('not true of myself') and were scored in the direction of higher cognitive, reflective, and compassionate wisdom characteristics before the average of the items was computed separately for the three wisdom dimensions. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ -values for the cognitive,

reflective, and compassionate dimensions of wisdom were .72, .74, and .66, respectively. To obtain a composite wisdom score, the average of the three dimensions was taken. The correlation between the three dimensions ranged from .48 ( $p < .001$ ) to .53 ( $p < .001$ ), resulting in an  $\alpha$ -value of .75.

#### 13.7.2.3 Demographic characteristics

Sex was measured as a dichotomous variable (0 = male, 1 = female). Although it was originally planned to measure age in years, De Volkskrant decided to assess age by seven age categories ranging from 0 (less than 20 years) to 6 (age 70 and above). Educational attainment was gauged by five categories ranging from 0 (elementary education – completed or not) to 4 (higher vocational education or university education).

#### 13.7.3 Sample

The sample included 7037 respondents who completed all of the questions of the on-line survey of *De Volkskrant* between January 31, 2009 and March, 9, 2009 and gave informed consent for the inclusion of their answers in a research study. Sixty-two percent of the participants were female, and over half (53%) were between the ages of 40 and 59 years (see Table 3). The majority of the respondents (60%) had a higher vocational or university education. Hence, the sample was not representative of the Dutch population but was skewed in a middle aged, higher educated direction.

#### 13.7.4 Analysis

Bivariate correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) were performed first to examine whether the three dimensions of wisdom and the demographic variables correlated similarly with the two happiness items to justify averaging the two items into one happiness measure. Due to the large sample size, we chose a stricter significance level of .01 instead of the usual .05 level of significance. A nested multivariate OLS regression analysis was employed to test Hypotheses 1. We analyzed whether the relation between wisdom and happiness was curvilinear by including the square of the wisdom score in the model. Interaction effects between wisdom and demographic groups were subsequently added to the model in a forward regression procedure to test whether the association between wisdom and happiness was significantly stronger for relatively disadvantaged sex, age, and educational groups as stated in Hypothesis 2. Wisdom was centered at the mean for the regression analyses to minimize the effects of multicollinearity.

### 13.8 Results

#### 13.8.1 Correlations between Happiness Measures, Wisdom Dimensions, and Demographic Variables

As shown in Table 3, the three dimensions of wisdom were positively related to the two happiness items, although the correlations with the reflective dimension of wisdom were stronger than with the cognitive and compassionate wisdom dimensions. A more



detailed analysis of the reflective dimension revealed that the presence of self-examination, self-awareness, and self-insight, expressed as an absence of subjectivity and projections, had the strongest correlation with happiness today ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and happiness in the last three months ( $r = 0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives was more moderately associated with happiness today and in the last three months ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $p < .001$  with each happiness items; not shown in table). All of the variables were similarly correlated with the two happiness items and the three dimension of wisdom, which justified averaging the two happiness items into one happiness measure and the three wisdom dimensions into one composite wisdom score.

Gender was unrelated to the happiness items. The association between age and happiness appeared to be slightly curvilinear with respondents under age 30 being less happy than other age groups. The correlation between educational attainment and happiness, by contrast, was positive and more linear.

Women tended to score higher on the compassionate wisdom dimension than men did. Respondents younger than age 20 and older than age 59 tended to score lower on the three dimensions of wisdom, whereas respondents between the ages of 30 and 59 tended to score higher on the three wisdom dimensions. All those correlations, however, were relatively weak, except for a somewhat stronger positive association between a higher vocational or university education and the cognitive and reflective dimensions of wisdom, partially supporting prior research (Ardelt, 2010).

### 13.8.2 Predictors of Happiness

A nested multivariate regression analysis was conducted to test the two hypotheses. Based on the bivariate correlation analyses in Table 3, the average of the two happiness items was computed to obtain a single happiness measure as the dependent variable and the three dimensions of wisdom were averaged to construct a composite wisdom score. In Model 2, sex, age, and educational categories were entered separately into the regression equation with the youngest age category (age less than 20 years) and the highest education (higher vocational or university education) as the omitted categories. Model 3 tested for the presence of interaction effects between wisdom and the individual sex, age, and educational categories in a forward regression procedure to minimize problems with multicollinearity.

**Table 3** Bivariate Correlation Matrix between Happiness Measures, Wisdom Dimensions, and Demographic Variables

|   | (1)    | (2)    | (3)    | (4)    | (5)    | M    | SD   |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|
| (1) How happy do you feel today?                            | -      |        |        |        |        | 7.16 | 1.18 |
| (2) How happy have you felt in the last 3 months?           | .58**  | -      |        |        |        | 6.95 | 1.37 |
| (3) Cognitive dimension of wisdom                           | .17**  | .16**  | -      |        |        | 3.72 | .45  |
| (4) Reflective dimension of wisdom                          | .35**  | .38**  | .53**  | -      |        | 3.81 | .46  |
| (5) Affective dimension of wisdom                           | .13**  | .10**  | .48**  | .48**  | -      | 3.42 | .42  |
| (6) Sex (1 = female)  | .01    | -.02   | -.01   | -.03   | .12**  | .62  | .48  |
| (7) Age less than 20 years                                  | -.05** | -.05** | -.09** | -.13** | -.04** | .05  | .23  |
| (8) Age 20 to 29 years                                      | -.04** | -.00   | .01    | .01    | .02    | .09  | .29  |
| (9) Age 30 to 39 years                                      | .00    | .02    | .06**  | .04**  | .02    | .14  | .35  |
| (10) Age 40 to 49 years                                     | .01    | -.01   | .10**  | .07**  | .06**  | .24  | .43  |
| (11) Age 50 to 59 years                                     | .01    | -.02   | .04**  | .03**  | .02    | .29  | .45  |
| (12) Age 60 to 69 years                                     | .03    | .04**  | -.10** | -.06** | -.07** | .15  | .36  |
| (13) Age 70 years and above                                 | .02    | .02    | -.13** | -.07** | -.06** | .03  | .18  |
| (14) Elementary education (completed or not)                | -.04** | -.04** | -.07** | -.06** | -.01   | .02  | .13  |
| (15) Lower vocational or general intermediate education     | -.05** | -.07** | -.17** | -.13** | -.06** | .06  | .24  |
| (16) Intermediate vocational or general secondary education | -.05** | -.07** | -.17** | -.13** | -.06** | .19  | .39  |
| (17) Higher general secondary education                     | -.01   | .01    | -.04** | -.02   | -.03** | .13  | .34  |
| (18) Higher vocational education or university              | .08**  | .09**  | .26**  | .20**  | .10**  | .60  | .49  |

Listwise deletion of cases, n = 7037

\*\* p < 0.01

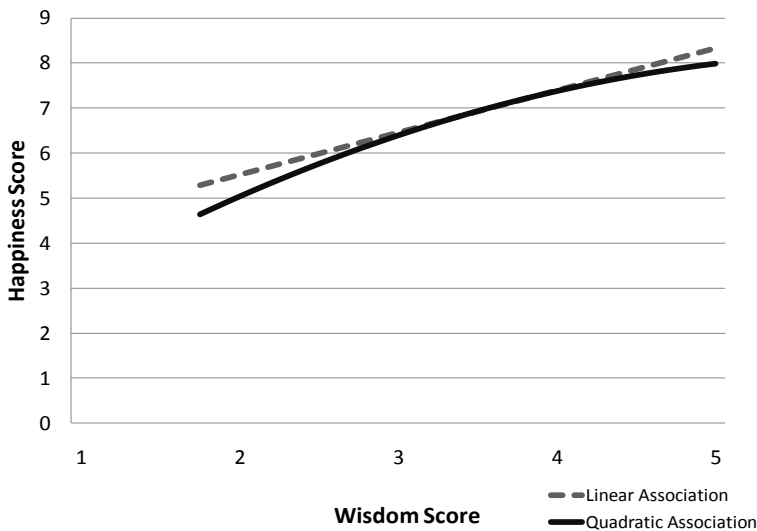
**Table 4** Effects of Wisdom and Demographic Characteristics on Happiness; Nested Multivariate Regression Analysis

|                              | Model 1<br>n = 7037 |          | Model 2<br>n = 7037 |          | Model 3<br>n = 7037 |          | Model 4<br>n = 5994 |          |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|
| <b>Independent Variables</b> | <b>b</b>            | <b>β</b> | <b>b</b>            | <b>β</b> | <b>b</b>            | <b>β</b> | <b>b</b>            | <b>β</b> |
| Wisdom (mean centered)       | .93                 | .30**    | .94                 | .30**    | .98                 | .32**    | .94                 | .31**    |
| Wisdom squared               | -.19                | -.04*    | -.18                | -.03*    | -.20                | -.04*    | -.20                | -.04*    |
| <b>Demographic Controls</b>  |                     |          |                     |          |                     |          |                     |          |
| Sex (1 = female)             |                     |          | -.01                | -.00     | -.01                | -.00     | -.01                | -.00     |
| Age less than 20             |                     |          | reference           |          | reference           |          | not included        |          |
| Age 20 to 29 years           |                     |          | -.03                | -.01     | -.02                | -.01     | not included        |          |
| Age 30 to 39 years           |                     |          | .05                 | .02      | .05                 | .02      | reference           |          |
| Age 40 to 49 years           |                     |          | .02                 | .01      | .02                 | .01      | -.03                | -.01     |
| Age 50 to 59 years           |                     |          | .04                 | .01      | .04                 | .02      | -.01                | -.01     |
| Age 60 to 69 years           |                     |          | .25                 | .08**    | .26                 | .08**    | .21                 | .07**    |
| Age 70 years and above       |                     |          | .42                 | .07**    | .42                 | .07**    | .37                 | .06**    |
| Elementary education         |                     |          | -.23                | -.03     | -.22                | -.02     | .13                 | .01      |
| Lower/intermediate           |                     |          | -.16                | -.03*    | -.14                | -.03     | -.12                | -.03     |
| Intermediate/secondary       |                     |          | -.07                | -.03     | -.06                | -.02     | -.07                | -.03     |
| Higher secondary education   |                     |          | .00                 | .00      | -.01                | -.00     | -.01                | -.00     |
| Higher education             |                     |          | reference           |          | reference           |          | reference           |          |
| <b>Interaction effects</b>   |                     |          |                     |          |                     |          |                     |          |
| Wisdom*Higher sec.           |                     |          |                     |          | -.36                | -.04*    |                     |          |
| Wisdom*Elementary            |                     |          |                     |          |                     |          | 1.03                | .05**    |
| R2                           | .092                |          | .102                |          | .104                |          | .106                |          |
| R2 change                    | -                   |          | .01**               |          | .001*               |          | -                   |          |

\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.001$

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, the bivariate correlation between the composite wisdom and happiness scales was significant ( $r = 0.30, p < .001$ ). However, as shown in Model 1 in Table 4, the association between wisdom and happiness was curvilinear. Figure 1 compares the bivariate association between wisdom and happiness with the quadratic relation shown in Model 1, displayed for the original 1-5 wisdom scale. The quadratic relation suggests that compared to a linear association between wisdom and happiness, respondents at the lower end of the wisdom scale tended to report less happiness, whereas the predicted incremental gain in happiness declined at the higher end of the wisdom scale. Yet, happiness was not expected to decrease at higher levels of wisdom as the turning point of the quadratic function (at 6.13) lies beyond the scale end point for wisdom.

**Figure 1** Linear and Quadratic Association between Self-Reported Wisdom and Happiness



Wisdom explained 9.2% of the variation in happiness and was a stronger predictor of happiness than any of the demographic variables in Model 2, which together explained another 1% of its variation. Older adults above the age of 59 tended to be significantly happier than respondents under the age of 20, and respondents with a lower vocational or general intermediate education tended to be somewhat less happy than those with a higher vocational or university education, although the effects of age and education were modest. Men and women appeared to be equally happy.

We used a forward regression procedure to test whether any of the interaction effects between wisdom and the sex, age, and educational groups were significant as

expected in Hypothesis 2. As shown in Model 3 in Table 4, only the interaction effect with higher general secondary education was statistically significant, indicating that the relation between wisdom and happiness was significantly smaller for respondents with a higher general secondary education than those with a higher vocational or university education, rejecting Hypothesis 2.

Because respondents in the two youngest age groups might still be in educational training and, therefore, their final educational attainment status is unknown, the analysis was repeated without respondents under the age of 30. As Model 4 in Table 4 shows, the interaction effect between wisdom and elementary education was positive and statistically significant. This means that the relation between wisdom and happiness was significantly stronger for respondents with only an elementary education than those with a higher vocational or university education, supporting Hypothesis 2 for respondents age 30 and older.

### *13.9 Discussion*

The results of this Dutch internet study revealed that wisdom, measured as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and compassionate personality characteristics, was positively and moderately related to happiness, even after controlling for sex, age, and education, confirming Hypothesis 1. The quadratic relation between wisdom and happiness signifies that happiness gains with greater wisdom tended to be lower among high wisdom scorers than among lower wisdom scorers as wise persons might focus more on eudaimonic well-being rather than hedonic happiness (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Yet, the quadratic association also suggests that relatively low wisdom affects hedonic happiness more than high levels of wisdom, indicating that a lack of wisdom might indeed be detrimental to happiness.

Hypothesis 2 was rejected. Wisdom was not more strongly related to happiness for women than men and older adults than younger and middle-aged adults. This suggests that wisdom is equally beneficial for men and women and individuals at all stages of the life course. Yet, being female or old by itself is probably not a good indicator for difficult life circumstances. To test the hypothesis that wisdom is most beneficial for subjective well-being for individuals in adverse circumstances, more specific information about the respondents' economic, social, and physical resources would be needed. However, it should be noted that among the small group of respondents over the age of 29 with only an elementary education, wisdom did have a significantly stronger association with happiness than among those with a higher vocational or university education, as stated in Hypothesis 2. Wisdom might have a greater impact on happiness when external life qualities and life chances are not optimal by facilitating coping with obstacles and hardships and enabling an appreciation of the good things in life (Ardelt, 2000, 2005; Clayton, 1982; Kekes, 1995).

Among the demographic characteristics, only the two oldest age groups (age 60 and above) were consistently positively related to happiness compared to the youngest age group after controlling for wisdom and the other demographic variables in the models.

This positive effect of the oldest age groups on happiness illustrates the well-known paradox of aging (Ryan & Deci, 2001) that happiness tends to increase with advancing age despite age-related challenges and losses (Carstensen, 1998; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

Our results show that hedonic happiness and wisdom are not as incompatible as some philosophers have stated. This means that a classical objection to the utilitarian ideal of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people has been empirically refuted. There is no reason to expect that a pig rolling around in the mud would be happier than a Socrates who reflects on the reality of life, as John Stuart Mill already argued (1990 [1863], p. 332). Or as Jahoda (1958) remarked, the view that reality is hostile to individuals is unqualified. Our result lends support to Bentham's (1789 [1970]) philosophy and the work of modern scholars such as Layard (2005) and Kahneman (1997).

Still, our results also highlight that the overlap between wisdom and happiness is small. In our study, wisdom explained only about 9% of the variation in happiness in the combined sample, and sex, age, and educational attainment explained an additional 1%. This indicates that other factors besides wisdom contribute to happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Or, to put it more philosophically, although Sophocles' dictum that 'wisdom is the supreme part of happiness' (quoted in Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990, p. 36) might be true for wise people, wisdom is clearly not the only source of hedonic happiness.

Alternative explanations for the correlation between wisdom and happiness could be addressed in future studies. Perhaps aspects of personality that influence happiness, also contribute to acquiring wisdom. For example, Neff, Rude and Kirkpatrick (2007) found that curiosity was positively correlated with both happiness and the cognitive, reflective, and compassionate dimensions of wisdom. It is therefore possible that personality factors explain the positive correlation between wisdom and happiness.

One major limitation of the study is the on-line convenience sample that was not representative of the general Dutch population. Women, middle-aged adults, and people of higher educational attainment were overrepresented, which might have influenced the results, although we controlled for those demographic characteristics in the analyses. Our sample was also selective among higher age groups. Older adults who use the internet might be more educated, economically privileged, healthier, and/or resourceful than those who do not, which might explain the lack of a significant interaction effect between the older adult age groups and wisdom on happiness. It is still possible that older adults in general and particularly disadvantaged older adults benefit more from wisdom than younger individuals. Another limitation is that respondents knew they were completing a wisdom and happiness questionnaire, which might have biased their answers in a more socially desirable and 'wise' direction. Moreover, the wisdom test was probably an important reason why many participants visited the website of the newspaper in the first place. As a consequence, people with more than an average interest in wisdom were probably overrepresented in the sample, which might have further biased the findings. It is possible that the correlation between

wisdom and happiness would have been stronger in a more diverse sample and if respondents had been unaware of the purpose of the study, which might have increased the variability of the wisdom and happiness scores. A common method bias might have also affected the results, although we tried to minimize the effect of common method variance by guaranteeing anonymity, presenting the wisdom questionnaire first and the happiness questions last, and using different answer scales for the wisdom questionnaire and the happiness questions (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow us to determine the causality of the relation between wisdom and happiness, although we suspect that the causality is bidirectional. Wisdom probably has a modest positive influence on hedonic happiness by helping people to reflect on their circumstances to cope better with life's hardships (Ardelt, 2005). Furthermore, the development of wisdom by itself might be rewarding and joyful through the experience of self-transcendence (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). But happiness might also foster wisdom. Positive affect and subjective well-being might facilitate self-reflection and a desire to explore the world which, in turn, might stimulate the development of wisdom (Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). It is likely that the pursuit of wisdom and happiness reciprocally facilitate each other but are still largely independent processes. Future longitudinal research will need to examine the relative contributions of wisdom and other variables to the attainment of happiness and whether it is more likely that wisdom increases happiness or happiness increases future wisdom.

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## **Transhumanism and the Wisdom of Old Genes**

### **Is Neurotechnology as Source of Future Happiness?**

#### **Summary**

*Technological progress seems to open ways for redesigning the human organism. This means that the affective system that is built into the brain by evolution can be redesigned with intent. One of the consequences will be that the word progress will get a new meaning. Progress won't be confined to enhancing the conditions of living, but it will change the way we react to the world. These possibilities are explored in a new kind of biological utopism called 'transhumanism'. This school foresees that a restructured human brain will give rise to 'more varied experience, lifelong happiness and exhilarating peak experiences everyday'. This essay considers the reality value of that expectation in the light of the current psychology of affects, in particular of presumed functions of hedonic experience. It is concluded that transhumanism overlooks that happiness will lose its meaning if it is treated as an isolated feeling. The affective system in our brain needs strong ties with the on-going interaction of the individual with its environment. Making people happier without enhancing the grip on their life will be contra-productive.*

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*'Homo sapiens, the first truly free species, is about to decommission natural selection, the force that made us. Soon we must look deep within ourselves and decide what we wish to become.'*

Edward O. Wilson Consilience, The Unity of Knowledge

Few words are more future-oriented than progress. Still, most part of this special issue of the Journal of Happiness Studies deals with the past in relation to the present. What has changed in the last decades or centuries and what are the consequences for the well-being of people? One way to get to the future of happiness from here on is to extrapolate the results of this kind of trend studies. However, this is a risky endeavor. If there is one thing to learn from the past, it is that the future has always been different, and often more outrageous, than people imagined. As a result, science fiction books age very quickly and futurology as a science does not exactly flourish compared to other sciences. This is clear if one searches the Internet. Altavista gives 6,601 webpages for futurology, 592,155 pages for sociology and 1,397,500 pages for psychology ([www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)). Futurology lacks prominence in a time period, when we most need it. Change is the only constant these days and a better grip on the future would be most welcome, but apparently, most people believe that nobody is able to give solid predictions of the future.

Humans are simply too shortsighted to look in the future. Probably foretelling the future is even theoretically impossible, because of the chaotic nature of reality. Minor events can make all the difference, because they can lead to a cascade of changes. Or to use the cliché, a butterfly can sometimes 'cause' a hurricane, according to some meteorologists (Stewart, 1989). Since it is impossible to take into account all the movements of all butterflies, it is impossible to give the weather forecast for too many days ahead. The same is true for the living animals. The Nobel prize winner and theoretical physicist Gerard 't Hooft predicted during a lecture several years ago that it won't be long before physics will have its theory of everything with an understanding of all elementary particles. However, he also told his audience he thought that two hundred more years of progress in science will not make it possible to predict the course of a dancing mosquito around a lamp. (For a more sound introduction in the chaos theory, see for example [http://amath.colorado.edu/appm/faculty/jdm/faq-\[2\].html](http://amath.colorado.edu/appm/faculty/jdm/faq-[2].html)).

The changes of foretelling the future of happiness are much slimmer. The subject is much more complex and the state of the art in happiness studies leaves a lot to be desired. All this seems to make writing and thinking about the future of happiness a silly enterprise. However much depends on the level of analysis. One cannot predict what will change, but it is much easier to predict what will remain the same. If we stick to the examples above, it is easy to predict that most butterflies will not cause hurricanes, that the weather in the winter will be colder than in the summer and that mosquitos will still dance around lights.

This kind of regularities also feature in this issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, for example Heylighen and Bernheim state that there has been significant

improvements in different areas of life, like wealth, health, security, knowledge, freedom and equality.

If we look at the enormous differences in living conditions in the world today, one can expect that more objective progress and life satisfaction will be possible in the future for the more disadvantaged. Bulmahn (this issue) shows that people have a surprising ability to adapt to changing conditions and to modernity. The human species evolved in the African savanna (e.g. Corbalis, 1991; Wills, 1994), but this does not make it impossible to enjoy life in modern industrial societies. We made a successful transition from caveman to computerman (<http://www.hilson.org/writings/evolu.htm>) and our biological make up will probably allow us to live happily in a future information society as well.

The predictions so far may hold if the future won't be too different from the present. However this is doubtful because of the rapid changes in science and technology. The human genome is about to be unraveled and we are in the middle of a computer revolution. We can expect DNA-manipulations, man machine combinations, nanotechnology, organ replacement and much more. We may gain the power to redesign the human body and mind. Or to paraphrase a slogan of a big Dutch electronic company: Let's make ourselves better.

There are two different reactions to this prospect. The first can be characterized as conservative romanticism. This reaction consists of turning one's back to science, technology and reason and this seems to be a common reaction nowadays, as can be seen from the New Age, alternative healing and spiritual gurus (Calne, 1999; Douglas, 1992). Transhumanism is a representative of the second reaction that is much more optimistic and can be positioned in the long-standing tradition of Enlightenment and utopianism. The developments that are feared by romanticists are embraced by transhumanists.

The World Transhumanist Association gives the following definition of this life philosophy:

*'Transhumanism is the philosophy which advocates the use of technology to overcome our biological limitations and transform human condition. The accelerating pace of technological development opens up such revolutionary prospects as superhuman artificial intelligence and molecular nanotechnology. The consequences of these developments may include the biochemical enrichment or redesign of our pleasure centers so we can enjoy a richer diversity of emotions, life-long happiness and exhilarating peak experiences every day; the elimination of ageing; the abolition of disease; and perhaps the gradual replacement of human bodies with synthetic enhancements and computers'*  
(<http://www.transhumanism.com>).

Transhumanism is humanism with an extra: the strong belief that reason, science and technology will result in social, physical and mental improvements (Mul, 1999). On the Internet one can find predictions that in fifty or hundred years life will be

eternal. The only question seems to be whether humans will be immortal or maybe life will be taken over by posthuman intelligent machines that may place mankind on a sidetrack. Another possibility is that humans will be upgraded with computer technology, so that they will have better memory, better intelligence and better coping skills (<http://members.brabant.chello.nl/~h.kluytmans/transh.htm>). In the future we will not need a life after death, because we can reach heaven on earth. Life will even be better. We will reach 'a loveliness that transcends any fantasized Christian afterlife' (<http://www.paradiseengineering.com/heaven.htm>).

If you think that quotes like this are not from peer reviewed journals than you are right, and it is easy to dismiss them entirely. However, this kind of speculation is an (extreme) extrapolation of the spectacular developments in computer technology, biotechnology, genetics and neurotechnology in the last decades. And it seems clear that scientific developments will really make it possible to make major changes in human nature. For example, we may 'correct the code' to cure or prevent genetic diseases (Thompson, 1994). But if we can change genes that cause diseases, why shouldn't we change the genes that makes us unhappy?

The developments in neurotechnology are equally impressive. At the moment it is possible to a certain extent to build chips into the brain. They can give a rudimentary form of hearing for people who are deaf, some vision for people who are blind and a certain amount of movement for people who are paralyzed (van Gelder, 2000). And one should not forget that there already have been extensive experiments with psychosurgery to cure psychiatric diseases, although most scientists and physicians regret this happened (Pressman, 1998; Rodgers, 1992). If the materialists are right and Cartesian dualism is wrong (e.g. Dennett, 1991) then I do not see any logical reasons why it will be impossible to change the mind in ways not imagined before. Maybe the brain is a Turing machine just like a computer and the mind can be stored in different media (Johnson-Laird, 1988). So further technological developments may make it possible to download the human mind into another medium. If one wants to climb the Mount Everest and dies because of an avalanche, there may be a backup copy to resume responsibilities at home.

I focus on the more extraordinary aspects of this kind of these predictions to show how difficult it is to say something useful about the unknown future. We can quote a song text of Queen and ask: 'who wants to live forever?' The answers do not come from science, but may be found in literary thought experiments. Simone de Beauvoir (1945) wrote in *Tous les hommes sont mortels* about Fosca. He was born in 1279 in Italy and discovers that one life is not enough to fulfill his mission. He takes a special potion and does not age any more. He goes to war, lives in peace, goes to war again, loses the persons he loves and is not able to bear life any more. He has seen it all, and it is all the same again and again. Everything loses its meaning. The moral of this story seems to be that death is not something to look forward to, but it is not as bad as immortality. The account of de Beauvoir is persuasive. Maybe all the excitement in climbing the Mount Everest fades if a backup copy is waiting at home. Losing is no fun, but gambling is utterly boring without this possibility.



However, Virginia Woolf (1928) gives a more positive account of a very long life in *Orlando*. The very long life of the principle character seems bearable enough and he (later in the book she) doesn't suffer from his/her conquest of time and death. I can think of no way to decide who is most realistic. Is it de Beauvoir or Woolf, or is immortality a good idea for some and not for others?

But as said, this is a subject for novels, movies and science fiction. All these genres gratefully exploit the possibilities of future scenarios and the cyborg (a mixture between a robot and a human being) is a common character in movies. But for an essay that is supposed to be scientific, it is too difficult to find some foundation. What we can do however is to focus on one important aspect of transhumanism. We can explore whether it is possible to change something in the affective system of the human brain that will make people happier. Are there any built-in weaknesses of our emotions that should be repaired by the neurotechnologists or geneticists of the future?

#### *14.1 Can we always be happy?*

The first thing to notice is that this question perhaps gives modern technology more credit than it deserves. Of course, progress in this field has been very impressive, but if we compare human inventions with the 'accomplishments' of evolution, it is clear that biology has not met its match. Biological machines are much more complex than the most advanced computers; it is estimated that the best computers have the same computational capacity as a snail (Steven Pinker, personal communication; Bergsma, 1999). Moravec takes the human retina as an example to estimate the computational power of numbers of neurons. This brings him to the conclusion that modern personal computers have comparable computational power as spiders. However, if progress in the information technology will be as fast as in the last decades, it can be expected that the computer will match the human brain in 2020s (<http://www.transhumanist.com/volume1/moravec.htm>). But as said, extrapolations like this are not always reliable.

The same sobering story can be told about genetics. Scientists are mapping the human genome, but we are very far from understanding how the genes interact and help the brain to develop. As yet, geneticists are unable to cure diseases like Huntington's that are caused by one single gene, so it will a very long way before we will be able to redesign the human brain that is formed by the complex interaction of a whole lot of genes.

The amount of work that needs to be done before we can redesign our pleasure centers is enormous, but this should not keep us from inventions that give us 'life-long happiness and exhilarating peak experiences everyday'. But how should we redesign our pleasure centers? On the Internet it is easy to find the prediction that it will be done and that future generations will live happily ever after because of it, but I could not find a description of how the new design of the pleasure centers should look like. In this article I will speculate about the options and whether or not they will make us happier.

An important obstacle in redesigning the affective system in our brains is the realization that emotions and mood cannot be considered in isolation. They are not the products of our pleasure and pain centers per se, but they play an important role in the interaction of the individual with their surroundings. Emotions are built into mammals by evolution to evaluate the ongoing interaction. Pain means that the current situation

should be avoided and pleasure motivates the organism to keep the situation as it is (e.g. Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Bergsma, 1995). Thus: happiness is the result of favorable living conditions and unhappiness results from the opposite. This can be seen from a comparison between nations. In rich, individualistic, democratic countries the great majority of people consider themselves to be happy, but this is not true in poor, developing countries (Veenhoven, 1996). So it is quite possible to raise the happiness of people in developing countries, but the way to do it is to raise the standard of living and to end wars. Objective progress in well-being is possible (Heylighen and Bernheim, this issue).

But what should we think of the transhumanistic solution? Suppose that it is possible to create a kind of short circuit in the brain so that somebody feels great whatever happens. It is hard to imagine that this person is able to survive. If something dangerous happens, the person will not flee but stays relaxed. The consequence is that he or she gets run over by a truck. The good mood will also make it impossible to become angry when somebody else harms the best interests of the happy person by mere carelessness. If somebody is only capable of happiness has a partner that dies or cheats, he or she will not feel grief or jealousy but remain happy as before. But this kind of living seems worse than immortality. Why shall you ever get out of bed or do anything, if you feel happy, whatever you do? Why shall we eat without hunger? Without pain and unhappiness life has no drive and loses its meaning.

The person with the overactive pleasure centers reminds one of the patients described by Damasio (1994) with frontal lobe damage. A classic example is Phineas Gage who was working on the railroad, when an explosion damaged his frontal lobes. His academic intelligence seemed to be spared, but his emotions were disconnected from his cognition. He lost his sense of direction in his life and couldn't cope anymore. Faced with a problem, he could name alternative solutions, but still he didn't know what to do. Modern patients with the same syndrome may score perfectly normal on IQ tests, but their ecological intelligence is insufficient and they fail in life the same way as Phineas Gage. Without emotions to keep right and wrong apart, they lose their sense of direction. We cannot cope without the distinction between pain and fear. So the same rule must apply when we only can experience happy moods. We even need positive and negative emotions for judgment processes that are considered by laymen as non-emotional and purely cognitive (Ketelaar and Clore, 1997).

Also, we do not need to wait for new technological developments to be able to stimulate the pleasure centers. Drugs like heroine and cocaine do just that (Crow, 1972). In the short term this gives pleasurable feelings, but long-term the consequences are mostly negative. The reason seems to be that the drug induced positive feelings are not related to the situation of the user in the world. Drug addicts are constantly

searching for good feelings, but let their life deteriorate, because they temporarily feel good in bad circumstances. They often have a lifestyle that nobody envies (McKim, 1986).

The simple transhumanist solution to create short circuits in the brain in such a way that everything that happens gives rise to good feelings, creates persons that reminds one of the laboratory rats from every introductory text book in psychology, that could stimulate the pleasure centers by pressing a lever (Olds and Milner, 1954). They were so busy doing this that they forgot to eat and died of starvation (Spies, 1965).

Perhaps this is an image that is too degrading (<http://www.wireheading.com>), but the major point is that pleasure is only one dimension of a good life. In addition to it, we want a life that is meaningful as well. This point can be elaborated with a case story of the neurologist Klawans (1990). He describes a patient with complex partial epilepsy. Most symptoms are reduced thanks to medication, but one symptom remains. She sometimes is taken over by a warm, intense orgasm lasting for about one minute. Klawans asks his patient if she wants to try a new medicine to stop these insults. The answer is affirmative. She has a satisfying sex life and she does not want orgasms when she takes her children to the dentist in a car, however pleasurable the insults are. Other patients seek treatment for these kind of divine insults as well, although Dostojewski wrote that he didn't want to miss his insults, not for all the joys of life. It was his trip to paradise.

Another line of research that leads to the same conclusion that in general we want pleasure in life, but need the dimension of meaning as well comes from the controversial work of Heath. He implanted electrodes in test subjects and he gave them the possibility to stimulate their pleasure centers. His conclusion:

'People don't self-stimulate constantly – as long as they are feeling good. Only when they're depressed does the stimulation trigger a big response. There are so many factors that play into a human being's pleasure response: your experience, your memory system, sensory cues ...' (Hooper and Teresi, 1991).

And besides that, we have emotions about emotions as well. We may well feel disappointed by our intense pleasure, if it generated artificially. Maybe people will be happy to escape the artificial 'life-long bliss' to return to old-fashioned positive moods that alternate with periods of misery.

Without pain to accompany pleasure our mood will be shallow, like that of the ancient Greek Gods. The philosopher Jacobs (2000, p. 66) writes:

'Think of Zeus. He sacrificed his son Sarpedon for Troy with indifference. In a desperate attempt to participate in the human passions the Gods fall in love with humans. This enables them to worry about the fate of their loved ones (...). But they do not really succeed.'

The moral of this story is that genetic engineering and neurotechnology that only aims to change the pleasure centers will have serious shortcomings. We do not need more pleasure an sich, but we also need things to do with our lives that are meaningful to us. Better pleasure centers are just a small part of the picture.

#### 14.2 Virtual reality

For good functioning we need emotions that have a close relation with the things happening around us. As Freud pointed out man has to live by the pleasure principle and the reality principle (e.g. Badcock, 1988). The pleasure principle is the innate tendency to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain and the second principle states that one cannot afford to lose contact with reality. However, transhumanism suggests a radical solution for this problem. In normal life reality imposes limits on the pleasure principle, but in a virtual reality the environment can be governed by the pleasure principle.

The first thing to notice is that it is probably impossible to create a virtual world that is rich enough to interact with freely. Dennett (1991) has described that it will be possible to create the illusion in a person that he lies on the beach in the sun. However as soon as one gives this person the possibility to move, the amount of feedback data needed explodes. A hand that digs in the sand needs different feedback, depending on the force of the movement of the arm. The combinations possible are so enormous that it will be impossible to plan them all in advance. According to Dennett this can be compared with computer games. Interaction is possible with them, but only because the player has a limited range of options to act. If one chooses to live in a virtual reality one has to be deemed to play *Space Invaders* all the time. This game is already outdated. Virtual reality offers experiences that are much better than this ancient computer game, but the theoretical point of Dennett is still plausible. The designer of a virtual reality has to limit the options for free exploration, because of the amount of data needed otherwise.

So even in virtual reality it is impossible to escape reality completely, but for arguments sake we shall forget these limits for a moment and pretend that an ideal virtual life is possible. Dennett described this virtual world in an interview as follows:

*'Everything you dream of will happen. You will win the Nobel prize, marry Michelle Pfeiffer, live in the best thinkable house and so on. And you will not realize that you are misguided by a machine, because you have taken a pill that has erased your memory of your former life' (Bergsma, 1997).*

In such a virtual world you will be as happy as your – ancient or redesigned – genes allow, but if you will offer people this ‘possibility’ most refuse, because they do not only want to be happy, they want to be right as well (Nozick, 1989). We want to avoid illusory happiness and we cannot afford it. Kraut (cited in Averill and More, 1993) has made this clear with a thought experiment more realistic than the one cited above.

Imagine you are still in high school and voted the most popular student by your peers. You are elated because of this well-deserved recognition, but afterwards you discover it was a cruel hoax: in reality you are the laughing stock of the school. The happiness you felt on the evening of the election is not something to think back of with gratitude. We want to be happy, but we have reason to avoid illusions. Averill and More (1993) summarize this with the statement that feeling happy is not always the same as being happy. Reality has to align with the pleasure you experience. In the future virtual reality will probably offer all kinds of new sensations and no doubt some of them will be pleasurable enough to enrich our lives, but it is not likely that the virtual world can replace reality and supply us with lasting happiness.

#### *14.3 Positivity offset and negativity bias*

We have to accept that reality limits the amount of pleasure or happiness we can experience. A possibility open for transhumanism is to soften the pain one has to endure. However this proposition is not feasible, because of the important functions of both pain and pleasure. A closer look at the functions of both show that changing them would have side-effects. The design of the affective system is very clever as it is.

Positive and negative emotions are calculated by separate neurological systems. We start out with the positive system. This tends to respond mildly positive in neutral circumstances. Cacioppo and Gardner (1999) describe this as positivity offset. This means that the person will feel weakly positive in neutral circumstances. The reason for this is that we need positive emotions to keep us going. Without them we would not explore novel or neutral appearing environments and we would miss possible means for survival. One of the results of the positivity offset is that we evaluate things that are neutral in a favorable way. We tend to appreciate the unknowable future, the average person or an unfamiliar Chinese ideogram (Cacioppo and Gardner, 1999). This also explains why people whose basic needs are fulfilled tend to view their life in a positive light (e.g. Veenhoven, 1984). People in rich countries tell researchers that they are happy with their life as a whole, probably because they are in a mild positive mood most of the time (Headey and Wearing, 1992).

Evolution has built the positivity offset into the brain to make sure we will not miss too many opportunities. But the need for survival (or offspring to be more precise) imposes clear limits to exploratory behavior. Exploring should not cause great dangers. The negativity bias in the neural circuits for negative emotion makes sure we avoid dangers very promptly. Negativity bias means that we react more strongly to negative situations than to positive ones. Because of this asymmetry the negative emotions can easily override our tendencies to approach. The logic behind this is that 'it is more difficult to undo the consequences of an injurious or fatal assault than those of an opportunity unpursued' (Cacioppo and Gardner, 1999). In danger we feel a strong urge to run and when angry we are strongly inclined to act and to undo the harm done by others.

The asymmetry of positive and negative affect is also apparent if we look at the duration of these feelings. Negative emotions last much longer than positive ones (Frijda, 1987). The logic behind this is identical to that of the positivity offset and the negativity bias. If a situation harms our concerns, we cannot afford to ignore this. The negative affect lasts and keeps us eager to change things for the best. However a strong and lasting feeling of joy would make us passive. We would not have to do anything after we reached the top. The fading of the peaks of joy leave us in the pursuit of more goals. This is a paradox for transhumanism. A stronger belief in progress than that of transhumanism is hard to imagine, but if the transhumanists would change their pleasure centers to experience lasting happiness, the motor of change would stick.

There is a strong evolutionary logic for intense pain and mild joy, and it is difficult to imagine circumstances where we can afford to change this. We should not soften the pain or intensify the joy in healthy individuals who are functioning well, because otherwise the quality of the individual's interaction with the environment deteriorates. The story may be quite different for persons with a mood disorder, but that is another subject.

#### *14.4 Reality through pink glasses*

The discussion so far about positivity offset and negativity bias and the temporal differences of positive and negative affect has made it clear that there is no one to one correspondence between things that happen in reality and our affective reaction to it. Emotions are not pure. This becomes even clearer if we realize that our emotional reactions are dependent on the meaning we attach to a given situation (e.g. Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Izard, 1991). The relation between reality and our emotional reactions to it is strained. Maybe we can win a little happiness by taking this one step further. Can transhumanists shift the balance between the pleasure and reality principle a little, so that we feel better without disturbing the interaction of the organism with its surroundings too much? This is a more subtle manipulation than the one described above. The suggestion discussed above was to soften the pain and to intensify pleasure by changing the emotional measuring-instrument in the brain. But this time we do not change the range of emotional experiences, but only try to accomplish that everybody will develop a rosier image of reality. Pain will become less frequent because of it, and often less intense. The opposite will be true for the positive emotions. Is this a serious possibility? The answer is 'Probably not'. Evolution already has stretched this possibility to its limits.

Most revealing is how we view the world. In general we have a positive worldview, or to use the phrase of Rimé, we form a symbolic universe that is just and in which life has meaning (Rimé, 1999; Bergsma, 1999b). In our symbolic universe we ourselves are important, worthwhile, better than average and safe. We 'suffer' from positive illusions and it has become clear that without it we are at risk for depressions. The phenomenon called depressive realism describes the tendency of mildly depressed people to view the

world as it is and themselves as they are. Only severely depressed persons suffer from negative illusions (Collijn, 1991).

Reality is too difficult to bear, as Freud put it (Ladan, 1999). As a result we have developed all kind of defense mechanisms (Freud, 1936), or to put it in theoretically neutral terms, we have an amazing ability for self-deception (Ford, 1996). An anecdote tells this story the best. An international expert on the subject of denying the symptoms of heart failure, died of an heart attack, when he wanted to mount a horse because he himself had denied his own symptoms of heart failure (Ford, personal communication; Bergsma, 2000). This blindness for one's situation is not unusual. Patients who have been told that they have a fatal disease often go on to make plans for the future and forget the prognosis of the physician (Frijda, 1987). The need for positive emotions is so strong that we form a picture of reality that suits our own needs, and sometimes we suffer the consequences, as in the case of the expert on the denial of heart symptoms.

One last example makes this point. One of the main functions of religion is to give live meaning. It gives solace that the setbacks you experience have a deeper meaning, even when this is difficult to see this yourself. Religion offers an interpretative framework and may increase feelings of efficacy, control and security. Marx described religion as the 'opiate of the masses' and religion has indeed a slight positive correlation with affective well-being (Diener et al., 1999) But how do people react when they lose their religion? This has been a mass phenomenon in the last decades in the Netherlands. More than half of the Dutch population is no longer affiliated with a church anymore, but still a comparison between nations tells us that the Dutch are relatively very happy (Veenhoven, 1996). How is this possible? The flexible way in which we twist reality to suit our needs gives a part of an answer. Many Dutch people have lost contact with official religion, but as a result they have formed more personal religions and have constructed their own images of God, like the adherents of the New Age movement do. If the church no longer gives our life a meaning, we invent a new religion to find shelter for the harsh reality (Janssen, 1998).

Besides, changing the balance between the lust and reality principle is not a new phenomenon. This condition is known as mania or in a mild case hypomania. The mood of a person with hypomania is described in the DSM-IV as 'euphoric, unusually good, cheerful of high' (and may also be irritable). The person with hypomania has an inflated self-esteem, is more involved in goal-directed activities and has much energy. But one of the dangers is an 'excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g. the persons engages in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments)' (APA, 1994, p. 338). Even the mild state of hypomania can better be avoided, because the grip on reality fades to an extent that the long-term consequences are too painful.

### *14.5 Conclusion*

The need for positive emotions and moods is apparent and humans with an excellent mental health have a strained relationship with reality because of this. We

will stretch reality to suit our needs and sometimes suffer consequences because of it. One step further and we fit the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder. This leaves not much room for transhumanists who want to enhance happiness along these lines. The pleasure principle is powerful enough as it is.

The other discussed transhumanist options to create more pleasure by living in a virtual reality or by stimulating the pleasure centers more often, did not seem to be productive either. The blind forces of nature that designed our affective systems did quite a reasonable job and it won't be easy to outperform biological evolution. If we look deep into ourselves and must decide what we wish to become, we can perhaps answer that the design of the emotional circuits in our brain does not leave much to be desired. This is in line with the conclusion that most people in modern industrial societies are quite happy as it is. As long as progress does not push us to the limits of our adaptive potential, the best option is not to redesign our brains, but to change the world we live in. Maybe science and technology will make a better world.



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## **Positieve psychologie kan niet zonder negativiteit**

### **Summary**

*Positive psychology will harm itself if it submits to the tyranny of positivity (Held, 2002), that is apparent in parts of the self-help literature and for some of its prominent members. Negative emotions serve a critical function in our lives, and will enable us to stay focused on the parts of reality that are necessary for optimal functioning. We need both reality and the lust principle.*

Dit hoofdstuk is verschenen in Psychologie en Gezondheid

## 15.1 Inleiding

*‘Wij die veroordeeld zijn tot geluk moeten vooral ons recht op ongeluk gaan verdedigen, als we tenminste vrij willen blijven.’*

Pascal Bruckner<sup>21</sup>

Voor wie nog niet in de gaten heeft dat het liedje van de positieve psychologie met name in de Verenigde Staten een hit is geworden, zal ik nog één keer het refrein herhalen, zoals dat naar voren is gebracht door voorman Martin Seligman (2002) op de eerste pagina van zijn boek *Gelukkig zijn* kun je leren.

*‘De afgelopen vijftig jaar hebben psychologen zich met grote inzet op slechts één onderwerp gestort – geestesziekten – en ze hebben daarbij heel wat successen geboekt. (...) Maar we hebben een hoge prijs betaald voor deze stap voorwaarts. Door ons te richten op de omstandigheden die het leven ellendig maken, zijn de omstandigheden die het leven de moeite waard maken op de achtergrond geraakt. (...) De tijd is daarom rijp voor een wetenschap die probeert inzicht te krijgen in positieve emotie, competentie en deugd.’*

Het punt in dit artikel is niet dat het succes van de positieve psychologie voor een deel gebaseerd is op slimme retoriek, die het moet hebben van het voorspiegelen van een karikuraal beeld van de ‘gewone’ psychologie. Ik zal in plaats daarvan betogen dat niet de gewone psychologie, maar juist de positieve psychologie in het zwaard van de eenzijdigheid dreigt te vallen. De in zwart-wit geschetste tegenstelling tussen negatieve en positieve aspecten van het functioneren dreigt de positieve psychologie een karikatuur van zichzelf te maken. De stroming lijkt over het hoofd te zien dat negatieve gevoelens en gedachten een constructieve rol kunnen spelen in iemand leven. Of zoals Barbara Held (2002, 2004) het heeft uitgedrukt: De positieve psychologie is nodeloos negatief over negativiteit.

Een mooi voorbeeld trof ik aan in een oud nummer van *Psychologie Magazine*, waarin de lof van het optimisme werd gezongen. Hierbij werd verwezen naar het Amerikaanse onderzoek van de psycholoog Martin Seligman onder verzekeringsverkopers.

*‘Iedereen die wel eens telefonisch heeft geënquêteerd of iets moest verkopen, weet dat het een van de meest moedeloosmakende beroepen is. Elke keer moet je moed verzamelen om de telefoon op te pakken, om weer een stroom van bitse afwijzingen te incasseren. Driekwart van de verzekeringsverkopers gooide het bijltje er dan ook binnen een jaar bij neer. Seligman ondervond echter dat mensen die hoog scoorden*

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<sup>21</sup> Dit citaat is mij aan de hand gedaan door een anonieme reviewer, die ik graag dank voor deze en andere nuttige suggesties.

*op een test voor optimisme, het twee keer zo lang volhielden als anderen. Bovendien verkochten ze bijna veertig procent meer dan de pessimisten.'*

Ik geloof niet dat deze positieve instelling voor de betrokkenen zo positief heeft uitgewerkt. Hogere verkoopcijfers zijn natuurlijk mooi meegenomen, maar ik zou eigenlijk niet weten waarom het zo goed is om langer dan strikt noodzakelijk is in een hondenbaan te blijven hangen. Pessimisten hebben eerder in de gaten dat het leuren met verzekeringspolissen weinig geluk zal brengen en ze haken terecht snel af. De obsessie met het positieve maakt dat de functie van het negatieve wordt verwaarloosd.

Dat het voorbeeld van Seligman toch aangehaald wordt om de voordelen van optimisme te bezingen, toont aan dat zowel leken als psychologen een blinde vlek hebben voor de schaduwkanten van positief denken. Tijdens het Europese Positieve Psychologie Congres dat eind juni 2010 in Kopenhagen werd gehouden ([www.ecpp2010.dk](http://www.ecpp2010.dk)), was bijvoorbeeld de Amerikaanse psycholoog Corey Keyes even eenzijdig gericht op het positieve. Hij wil zo graag dat mensen floreren, dat hij vindt dat tachtig procent van de bevolking psychologische begeleiding nodig heeft om de positieve geestelijke gezondheid te stimuleren. Dus als je de vraag of de maatschappij steeds beter wordt voor mensen zoals jij ontkennend beantwoord, dan kom je al in de gevarenzone van 'niet positief genoeg' of 'niet beschikkend over een afdoende positieve mentale gezondheid' (Keyes, 2005). Zo'n oordeel is vergelijkbaar met een dokter die tegen mensen zegt, dat zij niet gezond zijn omdat ze niet fit genoeg zijn om morgen de marathon te kunnen lopen. De druk om positief te zijn is bij Keyes zo groot, dat hij als vanzelf een negatief oordeel velt over de meerderheid van de mensheid. Dat geeft hem alle ruimte om de wereld te redden, maar ik betwijfel toch of dat op deze manier daadwerkelijk gaat lukken.

Hoe de positieve drang in het dagelijks leven kan ontsporen, beschrijft de journaliste Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) in *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. Toen bij haar borstkanker werd geconstateerd, was zij daar natuurlijk overstuurd van. Maar toen ze uiting gaf aan haar verontwaardiging en woede over haar situatie, adviseerden lotgenoten haar een therapeut te zoeken om zulke negatieve gevoelens uit te bannen. De meest extreme positieve denkers hielden haar voor dat ze haar ziekte beter kon zien als een geschenk waar ze dankbaar voor moest zijn, iets waar Ehrenreich weinig voor voelde. Negativiteit zou haar overleven in gevaar brengen, hoewel daar geen enkele evidentie voor is (Coyne, Tennen & Ranchor, 2010).

### *15.2 Eenzijdige positiviteit faalt in Glasgow*

Op de conferentie in Kopenhagen maakte de Schotse onderzoeker Carol Craig (2010) bezwaar tegen de eenzijdige positieve aanpak door een vergelijking met Glasgow te maken. In haar boek *The tears that made the Clyde* beschrijft zij dat deze postindustriële stad het onevenredig zwaar te verduren heeft gehad. Twintig jaar positieve aanpak heeft het beeld echter danig veranderd. Glasgow is door tijdschriften

uitgeroepen tot de hipste stad van het Verenigd Koninkrijk, omdat de stad is uitgegroeid tot een exclusief winkelparadijs en een centrum van culturele activiteiten, en is door de Unesco uitgeroepen tot muziekstad. Het is een paradijs voor toeristen en de mensen in de goede wijken.

De positieve aanpak die gebaseerd was op het uitbouwen van sterke kanten heeft echter niet iedereen geholpen. In sommige achterstandswijken van Glasgow is de levensverwachting van mannen 55 jaar, groeien kinderen massaal op in gebroken gezinnen, neemt de vetzucht epidemische vormen aan, zijn seksueel overdraagbare aandoeningen ongewoon gewoon en is drugsgebruik aan de orde van de dag. De inwoners van de achterstandswijken zijn bovendien zware innemers van alcohol en wereldkampioen levercirrose. Tot slot zijn psychische stoornissen en opnames in psychiatrische opnames erg frequent in deze wijken. In Glasgow staat bijvoorbeeld een middelbare school die al acht leerlingen aan steekincidenten verloren heeft. Glasgow is veilig voor toeristen, maar niet voor iedereen.

Craig betoogde daarom dat het in zo'n geval niet volstaat om de arme wijken in te trekken en daar de specifieke positieve psychologie oefeningen te doen, zoals oefeningen in dankbaarheid of het benadrukken van sterke kanten. Craig (2010, p. 19, vertaling AB): 'Ik geloof nog steeds dat een positief waarderende aanpak problemen op kan lossen en een nuttig instrument kan zijn, maar soms is zij niet op zijn plaats. Veel belangrijke veranderingen in de maatschappij zijn niet tot stand gekomen door een positieve aanpak, maar door gerechtvaardigde woede en verontwaardiging.' Craig noemt daarbij het afschaffen van de slavernij, het opkomen voor vrouwenkiesrecht en de verbetering van erbarmelijke arbeidsomstandigheden als voorbeelden.

Craig vergelijkt de eenzijdig positieve aanpak als het plakken van behang over de scheuren in de muur. Het gaat er beter van uitzien, maar de kern van problemen blijft onaangeroerd. In dit artikel zal ik betogen dat de eenzijdige nadruk op positiviteit die kenmerkend is voor met name de meer populaire vormen van de positieve psychologie, eveneens schadelijk kan zijn. We hebben zowel positieve als negatieve emoties nodig. Ik zal eerst aan de hand van verschillende onderzoekslijnen kort schetsen waarom negativiteit nodig is, en daarna proberen te schetsen waar de grenzen liggen van het benadrukken van het positieve<sup>22</sup>.

Hierbij moet aangetekend worden dat sommige voormannen van de positieve psychologie inmiddels voorzichtig het belang van negativiteit onderschrijven. In Kopenhagen werd door drie keynote sprekers, Barbara Fredrickson, Alex Linley en Howard Gardner, een paar minuutjes stilgestaan bij het belang van negativiteit. Aspinwall en Tedeschi (2010) hebben dit misschien wel het krachtigst uitgedrukt door 'hersenloos' positief denken krachtig te veroordelen als 'zoetstof terrorisme, zwarte

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<sup>22</sup> Ik negeer hieronder het aspect van individuele verschillen, en het gegeven dat angstige mensen soms meer gebaat zijn bij pessimisme dan optimisme, omdat ik dat al een keer eerder aan de orde heb gesteld (Bergsma, 2009). Geïnteresseerden verwijs ik graag door naar het werk van Norem (2001, 2008).



pieten voor het slachtoffer, en het promoten van een gedachteloze versie van positief denken voor persoonlijk gewin.’

### *15.3 Volmaakt gelukkig functioneert suboptimaal*

De argumenten voor het belang van negativiteit zijn talrijk. Het meest essentieel is de rol die negatieve emoties spelen in de overleving. In de terminologie van Frijda (1988) bewaken emoties onze belangen. Als een ander onze belangen bewust schaadt worden we boos en proberen we het onrecht recht te zetten, als er gevaar dreigt worden we bang en willen we vluchten. Negatieve emoties hebben een functie in het tot stand brengen, onderhouden of onderbreken van relaties met onze omgeving.

Het blijkt dan ook dat te gelukkig (lees positief) zijn niet automatisch samengaat met gunstigere levensomstandigheden. De mensen die van zichzelf zeggen dat ze extreem gelukkig zijn, doen het wat betreft inkomen, opleiding en politieke participatie bijvoorbeeld slechter dan mensen die zeggen dat ze zich gewoon gelukkig voelen (Oishi, Diener & Lucas, 2007). Ook blijken mensen die rapporteren dat ze extreem gelukkig zijn iets minder lang te leven (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). Wie te gelukkig is ontnemt zich waarschijnlijk de gelegenheid de koers van het eigen leven af en toe bij te sturen.

De westerse nadruk op geluk heeft bovendien als bijwerking dat de weerstand tegen negativiteit vermindert. Bij vergelijkingen blijkt bijvoorbeeld dat Europese Amerikanen weliswaar een hoger geluk rapporteren dan Aziatische Amerikanen, maar dat ze ook sterker beïnvloed worden door tegenslagen. Amerikanen van Koreaanse of Japanse komaf hervinden sneller hun emotionele evenwicht als er iets mis is gegaan (Oishi, Diener, Choi et al, 2007). Dit effect kan een beetje vergeleken worden met iemand die eerste klas vliegt en dan uit zijn dak gaat vanwege een half uur vertraging, omdat hij immers voor perfecte omstandigheden heeft betaald, terwijl iemand in een krappe zitting het half uurtje extra reistijd rustig accepteert.

Vechten tegen negativiteit kan bovendien negatieve gevoelens en piekeren versterken. In opvattingen over mindfulness wordt ervan uitgegaan dat het verwelkomen van negativiteit en er welwillende aandacht aan besteden, leidt tot het sneller voorbij gaan van negatieve stemmingen. Streven naar perfect geluk dat geen ruimte biedt voor negatieve gebeurtenissen, is een ongezonde vorm van perfectionisme (Lundh, 2004). Een welwillende houding tegenover negativiteit blijkt zelfs de kans op terugval bij depressies te kunnen verkleinen (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). En Russ Harris (2009) noemt de pogingen om het geluk te dwingen zelfs een valstrik, die je opzadelt met meer negatieve gevoelens.

Het eenzijdig beklemtonen van positiviteit kan bovendien mensen die ernstig ziek zijn negatief beïnvloeden, omdat hen zelfbeschuldiging als copingstrategie opgedrongen wordt. Als je positiever was geweest dan zou je niet ziek zijn geworden en als je eenmaal ziek bent is het misschien je eigen schuld dat je niet herstelt (Held, 2004). Opgeven en loslaten, kunnen in sommige gevallen positiever uitpakken dan altijd blijven geloven in de positieve uitkomst (Carver & Scheier, 2003). En Larsen et

al (2003) schrijven dat het tegelijkertijd activeren van positieve en negatieve emoties behulpzaam kan zijn bij het wijs worden uit stressoren. Ryff en Singer (2003) spreken daarom van een valse dichotomie tussen positief en negatief. De dwang om positief te zijn, blijkt tot slot een zware belasting te kunnen zijn. De Amerikaanse psycholoog Alicia Grandey (2003) ontdekte dit onder meer bij medewerkers van een call center. In bedrijven waar werknemers altijd beleefd en vriendelijk moeten blijven, komt meer emotionele uitputting voor. Wie de vrijheid heeft negatieve gevoelens te ervaren en daar constructief naar te handelen, heeft duidelijk minder last van deze slijtage.

#### *15.4 Mentale contrasten*

Hoezeer positieve en negatieve gevoelens elkaar nodig hebben blijkt misschien wel het duidelijkst uit het werk van de Duitse psycholoog Gabriele Oettingen. Zij verrichtte onderzoek onder vrouwen met veel overgewicht die zich opgaven voor een afslankprogramma. Vrouwen die ervan uitgingen dat het programma succesvol zou zijn, vielen gemiddeld bijna 13 kilo meer af dan vrouwen die pessimistischer waren. Scoort positief denken daarmee alweer een punt? Ja, maar de resultaten zijn toch ingewikkelder.

Deelnemers aan het onderzoek die dachten dat afvallen gemakkelijk zou gaan – vrouwen dus met onrealistische positieve fantasieën over hoe gemakkelijk het zou zijn om zich aan een dieet en een fitnessprogramma te houden – vielen gemiddeld bijna 12 kilo minder af dan vrouwen die dachten dat het lastig zou worden. Met andere woorden, de vrouwen die inzagen hoe moeilijk hun taak zou zijn, vielen meer af dan vrouwen die in zalige onwetendheid meenden dat het programma een eitje zou zijn. Optimisme over de toekomst, gepaard aan een gezonde dosis pessimisme over de uitdaging, leidde tot positievere resultaten (Oettingen & Stephens, 2009).

Uit onderzoek blijkt dat hetzelfde effect zich voordoet bij het zoeken van een baan of een partner. Duitse studenten deden het minder goed op de arbeidsmarkt, zo bleek uit onderzoek, als ze er lekker op los fantaseerden over een leuke baan met een fijn salaris. Studenten die meenden dat het lastiger zou worden om een baan te vinden, zorgden voor activiteiten die hun cv zouden opsieren en staken meer tijd en energie in het onderhoud van het sociale netwerk waarmee ze een mooie functie wilden binnenhalen (Oettingen & Stephens, 2009).

Een onderzoek onder Amerikaanse collegestudenten die verliefd waren op iemand met wie ze geen relatie hadden, leidde tot dezelfde conclusie. De studenten moesten aangeven hoe optimistisch of pessimistisch ze waren over de kans dat ze een relatie zouden krijgen met die persoon. Vervolgens werden ze een paar maanden gevolgd door de onderzoekers. Studenten met positieve, maar door pessimisme in toom gehouden verwachtingen, deden het beter, zo bleek, dan studenten met positieve fantasieën over liefde op het eerste gezicht. En ook beter dan studenten die meenden dat de kans om de ander voor zich te winnen heel klein was. Positieve fantasieën leidden ertoe dat de gehoopte relatie alleen in dagdromen geconsumeerd wordt. Studenten die zichzelf reële kansen gaven, maar die ook rekening hielden met de mogelijkheid dat ze de ander

misschien niet zouden kunnen verleiden, zagen zich gedwongen het lot een handje te helpen. Die studenten gaven dus complimentjes, toonden zich oprecht geïnteresseerd en kochten presentjes. De gedachte dat de relatie misschien geen werkelijkheid zou worden, bracht hen ertoe de noodzakelijke inspanning te leveren (Oettinger & Mayer, 2002).

Dus als je wilt profiteren van optimisme, zul je ook de pessimist in jezelf moeten vinden. Lisa Aspinwall ziet diezelfde gedachte uitgedrukt in de woorden van de Serenity Prayer, een gebed om kalmte. Dit gebed wordt gezegd tijdens bijeenkomsten van Anonieme Alcoholisten en andere zelfhulpprogramma's: 'God, geef me kalmte om te aanvaarden wat ik niet kan veranderen, moed om te veranderen wat ik kan veranderen, en wijsheid om onderscheid tussen die twee te maken.' Volgens Aspinwall aanvaarden optimisten gemakkelijk wat zij niet kunnen veranderen. Daardoor hebben ze meer succes bij het veranderen van dingen die ze wel kunnen veranderen (Aspinwall, Richter & Hoffman, 2001).

### *15.5 Aristoteles metafoor van de ziel*

Deze korte, en incomplete opsomming moet volstaan om te laten zien hoe belangrijk negatief affect is in het leven van mensen. We kunnen deze onderzoeksresultaten in een breder kader plaatsen met behulp van een metafoor. Aristoteles vergeleek de functie van de ziel in het menselijk organisme met die van een schipper op een zeilschip (Oatley, 1992, p. 12). In deze vergelijking fungeren positieve en negatieve gevoelens als een kompas. Het positieve kompas slaat uit wanneer er koerswijzingen zijn in een goede richting, terwijl het kompas negatief uitslaat wanneer belangen geschaad worden (Bergsma, 2010).

Een van de meest cruciale inzichten uit de psychologie is dat het hedonistische kompas niet reageert op de werkelijke omstandigheden, maar op de kaart die we van de werkelijkheid gemaakt hebben. Dit geeft een enorme vrijheid om jezelf met je gedachten angstig, depressief of gewoon ongelukkig te maken (Watzlawick, 1983). Het ombuigen van dit soort onnodige negatieve gedragspatronen is de hoofdtak van alle vormen van cognitieve psychotherapie (Clark & Fairburn, 1997).

De positieve psychologie maakt gebruik van ditzelfde mechanisme, door mensen te wijzen op hun sterke kanten, op dankbaarheid, optimisme, positieve ervaringen en positieve relaties (Peterson, 2006). Een deel van de stroming lijkt echter te vergeten dat je er met alleen een opgeleukte scheepkaart en een positief kompas niet bent. Je kompas reageert weliswaar op de kaart die je hebt gemaakt, maar je houdt het schip alleen op koers als je kaart voldoende te maken heeft met de werkelijke wereld (Bergsma, 2000). En aangezien de werkelijkheid beperkingen aan ons oplegt, hebben we soms negatieve gevoelens nodig om dit onder ogen te zien.

Hoe het mis kan gaan heb ik eens als journalist beschreven (Bergsma, 2007), hoewel ik de oorspronkelijke bron niet kan terugvinden. Proefpersonen kregen een training om hun huwelijksgeluk te vergroten en leerden tijdens zes bijeenkomsten van 2,5 uur bijvoorbeeld dat ze niet alleen tegen hun partner moeten zeggen wat er mis

gaat, maar ook wat ze fijn vinden en waarderen. Het mooie van zo'n training is dat het een meetbaar effect heeft op de tevredenheid over het huwelijk jaren later. Alleen maar mopperen is nu eenmaal geen basis om een relatie op te bouwen. De kleine groep vrouwen die de training erg serieus neemt, plukt daar echter de wrange vruchten van in de vorm van meer ontevredenheid over de eigen relatie vijf jaar later. Deze vrouwen veranderen hun gedrag na de training het sterkst en nemen de boodschap dat ze vooral positieve dingen tegen hun partner moeten zeggen zo letterlijk dat ze voortaan alleen maar zeggen hoe lief en aardig hun man is, maar hun woorden inslikken als er sprake is van een wezenlijk meningsverschil. Voor de man is dat misschien wel prettig om volledig zijn eigen gang te kunnen gaan en toch de beste van de wereld te zijn, maar de vrouwen worden ondanks hun suikerzoete glimlachjes en woordjes stiekem toch ontevreden over de gang van zaken en weten niet hoe ze het moeten bijsturen.

De moraal is dat het best gunstig kan zijn de kaart zo positief mogelijk te houden, maar dat je je neus stoot als je de werkelijkheid uit het oog verliest. Dit is ook precies het patroon dat werd gevonden tijdens longitudinaal onderzoek naar pasgetrouwde stellen. De neiging om kritiek te hebben, te zeuren, de partner opdrachten te geven en te beschuldigen, had een duidelijke eroderende werking op de relatie, wanneer dit soort negatief gedrag voortkwam in de context van kleine meningsverschillen. Een goede relatie kan je kapot maken door je eigen kaart te negatief in te kleuren. Hetzelfde negatieve gedrag had echter een positieve werking op de relatie, wanneer er sprake was serieuze relationele moeilijkheden. In zulke gevallen is het beter de negatieve aspecten van de werkelijkheid onder ogen te zien en daar actief iets aan proberen te veranderen (McNulty & Russell, 2010).

Een positieve psychologie die negatieve ervaringen wil uitsluiten, lijkt niet vruchtbaar te kunnen zijn. Voor het algemene publiek geldt: de boodschap van positieve psychologen kan best serieus genomen worden en misschien is het voor mensen de moeite waard te onderzoeken in hoeverre oefeningen of theorieën toepasbaar kunnen zijn in het eigen leven, maar uiteindelijk moet iedereen zelf blijven uitproberen en ervaren wat in het eigen leven het beste werkt. Het goede leven is onbereikbaar voor wie wil leven naar de deskundigheid van positieve psychologen zonder het tegenwicht van het gezonde verstand. Aristoteles duidde deze oplossing aan als de gulden middenweg, en hoewel ik niet geloof dat die echt bestaat, kan het erg productief zijn daar toch naar te zoeken (Franklin, 2010).

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# Imperfectly Happy

## Summary

The scientific study of optimal human functioning is positive psychology, and one of its most important subjects is happiness. Positive psychology is a late fruit of the European ‘Enlightenment’, the intellectual tradition that contested the religious view on happiness that dominated in the Middle Ages. Whereas religion told that happiness could be found only in the afterlife and that life on Earth was not meant to be enjoyable, the Enlightened thinkers deemed happiness both possible and desirable. One of the most influential proponents of that view was Jeremy Bentham. In his 1789 book on ‘Morals and Legislation’ he made happiness the basis of a moral philosophy, which the moral value of any action depends on its contribution to human happiness, the best action being the one that results in the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Application of this principle to individual choice is called ‘actor utilitarianism’ and application of it to policy making is called ‘political utilitarianism’ or ‘rule utilitarianism’.

This thesis is inspired by his ideology, and tries to add to the utilitarian tradition in three ways. The first part of this thesis considers to what extent advice can create greater happiness, What is the quality of the advice that has been given through the centuries and how well does it fit with what we now know about the conditions of happiness? Is the psychologist Daniel Gilbert right in his statement that ‘Everyone has an opinion about happiness and unfortunately many of them write books’?

The second part is about how mental disorders affect the happiness of the great numbers of people that suffer from mental disorders. This is a neglected area of research, probably because the answer seems obvious. After all, suffering for the self or pain inflicted on others is the principal component of mental disorders. Is it true that mental disorders exclude happiness, and what are the clinical characteristics that are associated with lower happiness in the context of mental disorders?

The third part of the thesis deals with the limits of utilitarianism. How are wisdom and happiness related, and is there a limit to maximizing pleasure and preventing pain in individual lives?

### Part 1

#### Happiness advice

The first part of this thesis is about self-help and happiness. It consists of two sections. It focuses first of the definition of happiness that is used by contemporary happiness advisers and then it focuses on the quality of happiness counsels through the ages.

### *What kind of happiness is happiness advice about?*

Chapter 1 describes the happiness advice by prominent scholars that is available in bookstores, libraries and on the internet. It argues that the chances that the readers will profit from the advice are hampered by the fact that several authors use unexpected definitions of happiness and that it would be better if self-help advice would focus on a well defined concept of happiness that is based on positive mood. This is the most common denominator of the definitions used and it aligns with what readers will expect on the basis of a common dictionary. Self-help authors are also advised to be more open about the distinction between positive mental health and the outcome of happiness. Increasing the competencies will not always increase happiness and being more open about the distinction may help readers to put advice into perspective.

### *Happiness advice by classic philosophers*

Chapter 2 is an introduction to a special issue about ‘happiness counseling’ of the Journal of Happiness Studies of which I was the guest-editor. The issue considers advice through the ages by classic philosophers, as well as contemporary New Age thinkers and self-help authors. Three questions are addressed: 1) What is recommended for leading a happy life? 2) How does this advice fit in the worldview of the author and into a social, cultural and historical context? 3) Are the recommendations in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness?

It turns out that there are common themes in advice for a happy life, and for every modern psychological advice it is easy to find good examples in our intellectual history. Positive psychology has as yet little new to offer in this respect but has so far only rediscovered ancient truths. There is also much contradiction, that is partly due to the difference in life circumstances of present-day readers and the classical happiness counsellors. Some honoured philosophers offer advice that can harm happiness if it is taken to heart by present day readers. It would be good if consumers of happiness advice could be warned for these specific drawbacks. The emphasis of positive psychology on empirical science will enable us to get rid of a lot of counterproductive ideas, even if they have earned a prominent place in our intellectual history.

### *Happiness advice in contemporary self-help books*

Chapter 3 deals with advice for a happier life found in so-called ‘self-help books’, which are widely sold in modern countries these days. My first question was what is recommended, and I analysed 57 best-selling psychology books in the Netherlands. The primary aim of the books is not to alleviate the symptoms of psychological disorders, but to enhance personal strengths and functioning. Common themes are: personal growth, personal relations, coping with stress and identity. The books



popularize insights from psychology and draw in particular on the newly developing ‘positive psychology’.

The second question about the context of the advice, is answered by the fact that we live in a multiple choice society, in which the pursuit of happiness is in your own hands. The central theme in psychological self-help books is that you can feel good about yourself and your life if you put effort into it and make the right choices. An important theme in self-help is the emphasis on human strengths, something that self-help has in common with the new school of positive psychology. The authors are also strongly influenced by humanistic psychology with its focus on self-actualization and authenticity.

The third question is about the quality of the advice. The recommendations of self-help authors focus on the conditions that are highly correlated with happiness and it is also clear that self-help materials can have a significant positive impact on readers. The effects of happiness advice however are scarcely investigated, and it is not difficult to find recommendations in the self-help literature that are psychologically not up-to-date. It is regrettable that the positive and negative consequences of self-help are a neglected subject in academic psychology, because self-help books may be the most important—although not the most reliable—channel through which psychological insights find their way to the general audience.

### *Happiness in the garden of Epicurus*

Chapter 4 deals with Epicurus, a philosopher who lived in Greece in the 3rd century B.C. Like his contemporaries, he was much concerned with the question of how to live a good life. In his view the Chief Good is to decrease pain and increase pleasure. Though Epicurus is reputed for advocating the pursuit of refined sensorial pleasures, he recognized the need for deferring gratification or enduring pain. He advised his followers to lead a modest and contemplative life in friendly communities. His advice can be characterized as ‘serene hedonism’.

Epicurus (341–271 B.C.) lived at a time when philosophy flourished—the Hellenistic period in Greece. It was a time of great social and political upheaval, the mingling of different cultures and the decline of the city-state. Epicurus promised his followers happiness if they would step outside the turmoil of his time and live alongside him in a protected community called The Garden. His philosophy can be partly understood as a way of dealing with the political instability, wars and dynastic struggles and the feelings of alienation felt by many at this time.

Chapter 4 also considers its applicability of Epicurus philosophy for present day readers. It concludes that Epicureanism was quite accurate in describing the conditions of happiness and offered valuable guidelines in dealing with hardship and difficult emotional content. His ideas that happiness is the same as the absence of pain and that one should withdraw from society are less fortunate. It made him assume that happiness automatically follows if one is in the right state of mind, and that there is no need to actively seek interaction with the environment for the betterment of the

circumstances of life. However, Epicurus' advice to withdraw from society might have been a good option for his contemporaries given the societal turmoil in his times, but empirical research in present day society shows that happiness is correlated with more active engagement in society.

### *Schopenhauer about happiness*

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is well known for his pessimism, and he is scrutinized in chapter 5. At the end of his career, he wrote a book on how to live the most bearable life. This is a practical guide based on his personal experiences and illustrated by quotations from other thinkers subscribing to his views.

He did not believe in real happiness. In his view, the best a person can achieve is to reduce misery. Life is better if one's complaints are trivial and boredom sets in; since not much good is to be expected from life, it is wise to try to be satisfied with as little as possible, and not to ask for more.

It is likely that Schopenhauer's own place in society was a driving force behind his happiness advice. He was part of the elite and worked in universities, but his ideas did not receive the acclaim that Schopenhauer felt they were entitled to. His social life and relationships did not bring him satisfaction either; his happiness advice can be thought of as a way of convincing himself that what he was missing was not important. Just like the fox decided in the fable of Aesop that the grapes must be sour as he could not reach them.

Little of Schopenhauer's advice appears to fit current research on conditions for happiness. Schopenhauer's neurotic nature deprived him of satisfying relationships, but this does not mean that his advice for average readers to stay away from friendship and relationships is justified. Developing social skills and remaining active will make you happier in the long run. Following Schopenhauer's ideas would probably make us unhappier, even if we had the same neurotic personality.

### *Limits to tests of happiness advice*

Chapter 6 looks back at the special issue about happiness advice. All papers checked indirect empirical indications for effectiveness, typically by inspecting whether the things advised have been found to be related to happiness in empirical research. Some limitations of this approach are that some advisers used a different notion of happiness than we used in our special issue. We tried to interpret the advice as a modern reader looking for happiness would.

But if we conclude that some advice is counterproductive, it might be because we have a different definition of happiness in mind than the adviser. Other limitations are that the papers checked the advice for present day readers, not for the contemporaries of advisers, that the data that is used to check the advice is most often correlative in nature, and that the papers ignored personality differences.

We therefore can say that we only offered a first step on the road to empirically better happiness advice. Future research should focus on a wider range of happiness advisers, look at the interaction of the advice and individual readers and address the question of the usefulness of the advice experimentally.

## **Part 2**

### **Happiness and mental disorders**

The second part of this thesis touches a theme in the discussion on social progress. Optimists argue that we live longer and happier now than ever in human history, but pessimists retort that there were never so many people suffering mental disorder. In this line distinguished scholar Richard Layard, accuses contemporary society's of rampant individualism and adds: 'Mental health is now our biggest social problem - bigger than unemployment and bigger than poverty.'

Is high prevalence of mental disorder indeed incompatible with happiness of a great number? We tried to find some solid ground in this discussion with the help of an analysis of the Nemesis study, that consists of a representative sample (N = 7076) of the Dutch population and involved interviews at baseline in 1996 and again one and three years later. Mental disorders were assessed using the Composite International Diagnostic Interview. Happiness was measured using a single question on how often respondents had felt happy during the last four weeks.

#### *Happily disturbed*

Chapter 7 addresses, three questions: 1) How (un)happy are people with and without mental disorders? 2) What are the clinical characteristics associated with happiness among people with a mental disorder? 3) Does happiness predict recovery from mental disorders?

Of the respondents with a mental disorder 68.4% reported they had felt often happy, compared to 89.1% without a disorder. The chances of unhappiness are highest for people with having a mood disorder and with impaired emotional and social role functioning. Happiness enhances the changes of recovery from a mental disorder at follow-up.

#### *Do they know?*

Chapter 8 answers some of the questions that are raised by the fact that so many people with mental disorders report to be happy most of the time. The high levels of happiness are a surprise. Layard writes in The depression report; A New Deal for Depression and Anxiety Disorders that mental disorders have very serious consequences for well-being: 'We are not talking about the "worried well". We are talking about people whose lives are crippled by their distress. Such mental pain is

often worse than physical pain and it affects more people – not to mention their families.’

If people suffer from a mental disorder and still report to be happy usually, can that answer be trusted? Research suggest that this is typically the case for people without mental disorders, but this is not to say that everybody can. Perhaps people with mental disorders cannot judge their happiness adequately, because of affective and cognitive distortions.

We therefore checked the validity of happiness and satisfaction measures in the context of mental disorders. Responses to questions about happiness and life satisfaction turns out to have satisfactory concurrent, ecological and predictive validity for people with mental disorders. Though the level of happiness is lower among the people with mental disorders, conditions for happiness and contentment appear to be similar.

### *Lost Happy Life Years*

The two opening chapters of this part of the thesis did the groundwork, and in the remaining chapters (9 to 12) I have tried to put the findings into perspective. I have already mentioned that I do not agree with Layard that a mental disorder is a synonym for unhappiness, but Layard is right that unhappiness is concentrated in a minority of the people with mental disorders. They are responsible for 85% percent of the lowest levels of happiness of all citizens. If we want to make the ideal of the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers come true, than we should focus on treatment and prevention of mental disorders.

To underscore this point, we have calculated the loss happy life years that is associated with mental disorders in chapter 9. In this measure life-expectancy in years is multiplied by average happiness on a scale of 0 – 1. The average happy life expectancy for people who do not have a history of mental disorder is 63,2 years in the Netherlands. Mental disorders are responsible for an estimated loss of 36,6 million happy life years in the Netherlands alone.

### *A positive view on society*

Chapters 10 and 12 argue that the high rates of mental disorder in western countries cannot be accounted for by the perils of modern individualistic society. Most people with a mental disorder are in a good mood, and it is reasonable to assume that they profit from favorable living conditions in modern society. The fact that more people seek help for mental disorders, does not necessarily mean that we should blame modern society. Happiness is rising and is getting more evenly distributed in recent years.

### *A negative view on positive psychology*

A last theme in this part of the thesis is the role of positive psychology, and this is discussed in the chapters 8, 10 and 11. Positive psychologists distance themselves of treating mental disorders and dedicate themselves to enhancing the ‘flourishing’ of people. I think this is a great idea and I applaud it if positive psychologists should succeed in enhancing the happiness of people without mental disorders, but with low happiness. Positive psychology fits in the utilitarian ideology.

There are however several dangers in the new approach. One of the greatest dangers is that positive psychologists distance themselves from people with mental disorders that are studied in the old ‘negative’ psychology, or in ‘psychology as usual’. If we seek the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers, we should start with the people with the lowest happiness scores, and that are typically people with mental disorders. In this group the room for improvement is greatest. An extra reason to focus on these group is that the association between happiness and the psychological factors that are targeted in positive psychological interventions, is higher for people with mental disorders. I interpret this as signaling that there is not only more room for improvement, but there are also better changes in getting better returns on investments in positive psychological health.

Another factor is that people without mental disorders are usually quite happy and you can probably expect no returns in higher happiness if you would choose the very happy as a target group for an intervention. I argue that positive psychology should make clear who do not need help or perhaps cannot be helped, and should also investigate when quality of life can better be enhanced by non-psychological interventions.

### **Part 3** **On the value of happiness**

The last part of the thesis focuses on the limits and caveats of utilitarianism. Should we really go for greater happiness in the first place?

#### *Wisdom and happiness*

Chapter 13 focuses on a classical issue. In the history of utilitarianism there have been extensive philosophical discussions about the tensions between wisdom and happiness. Some regard wisdom as the ‘supreme part of happiness’, whereas others think that wisdom is more beautiful than happiness. John Stuart Mill (1863, p. 332) famously argued that it would be better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a happy pig. A wiser and a more accurate view on reality was to be preferred over positive affect.

Using a Dutch internet survey of 7037 respondents we discovered that wisdom and hedonic happiness are moderately, and positively correlated. The explained variance was 9% and the reflective dimensions of happiness seemed to be most important. We

found partial support for our hypothesis that wisdom is more important for people in less advantaged life conditions. This means that hedonic happiness and wisdom are not conflicting merits, but the overlap between the two is so modest that the entities are largely independent. Our results underscore the importance of the distinction between eudaimonic and hedonistic well-being.

Our data can be interpreted as a refutation of the philosophical idea that hedonic happiness is hampered by wisdom. The quest for greatest happiness for the greatest numbers should not be abandoned, because wisdom is of greater value. But it also is clear that the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers do not cover all the ground. The quest for wisdom is largely independent from positive affect and is worthwhile goal of human development.

The last two chapters discuss another limit of utilitarianism. Can happiness be raised by erasing all negative experiences?

### *Transhumanism*

Chapter 14 discusses technological progress that may open ways for redesigning the human organism. These possibilities are explored in a new kind of biological utopism called ‘transhumanism’. This school foresees that a restructured human brain will give rise to ‘more varied experience, lifelong happiness and exhilarating peak experiences everyday’.

I consider the reality value of that expectation in the light of the current psychology of affects, in particular of presumed functions of hedonic experience. It is concluded that transhumanism overlooks that happiness will lose its meaning if it is treated as an isolated feeling. The affective system in our brain needs strong ties with the on-going interaction of the individual with its environment. Making people happier without enhancing the grip on their life will be contra-productive. Feeling good in bad circumstances resembles taking powerful mood enhancing drugs to feel good, and in the meantime life deteriorates to an extent that even the drugs cannot repair.

### *A positive view on negativity*

Chapter 15 addresses the same question in positive psychology, a main goal of which is to maximize positive experiences. It is argued that positive psychology will do no good if it submits to what the psychologist Barbara Held has called the tyranny of positivity, that is apparent in parts of the self-help literature and for some of its prominent members.

Negative emotions serve a critical function in our lives, and will enable us to stay focused on the parts of reality that are necessary for optimal functioning. We need both reality and the lust principle, as Freud put it. The idea that we should seek the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers should embrace the idea that we need negative

emotions to identify the obstacles for future happiness. Negative emotions serve a critical role in keeping our lives on the right track.





# Onvolmaakt geluk

## Samenvatting

De positieve psychologie bestudeert optimaal menselijk functioneren en ziet geluk als een van haar belangrijkste studieobjecten. De positieve psychologie is daarmee een laat uitvloeisel van de Europese Verlichting, de intellectuele traditie die de dominante religieuze kijk op geluk uit de Middeleeuwen zou uitdagen. De religie had geleerd dat geluk alleen bereikbaar was in het hiernamaals en dat het ook helemaal niet de bedoeling was dat het Aardse leven prettig zou zijn, terwijl de intellectuelen uit de Verlichting juist volhielden dat geluk op Aarde niet alleen wenselijk, maar ook mogelijk zou zijn. Een van de meest invloedrijke voorvechters van dit gedachtegoed was de Engelse jurist, filosoof en sociaal hervormer Jeremy Bentham. In 1789 plaatste geluk hij in zijn boek *Morals and Legislation* in het centrum van zijn moraal filosofie. Hij beweerde dat de morele waarde van elke actie afhankelijk is van de bijdrage van die actie aan het geluk. De beste keuze is de actie die de grootste bijdrage levert aan het ‘grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal’. Deze ideologie staat bekend onder de naam utilitarisme.

Dit proefschrift is geïnspireerd door deze ideologie en probeert hier op drie manieren iets aan toe te voegen. Het bestudeert in de eerst plaats welke rol geluksadvies kan spelen. Welke kwaliteit heeft geluksadvies dat door de eeuwen is gegeven en in hoeverre sluit het aan bij wat we op dit moment weten over geluk. Heeft de Amerikaanse psycholoog Daniel Gilbert gelijk als hij verzucht ‘dat iedereen een mening heeft over geluk en dat er helaas velen zijn die op grond daarvan een boek schrijven’?

Het tweede deel van dit proefschrift richt zich op het geluk van de grote aantallen mensen die door een psychische stoornis getroffen worden. Dit is een onderwerp waar niet of nauwelijks onderzoek naar bestond, waarschijnlijk omdat het antwoord wel duidelijk lijkt. Immers, het lijden of het anderen laten lijden is de centrale kern van de definitie van iedere psychische stoornis. Klopt het echter wel dat psychische stoornissen geluk onmogelijk maken? Welke psychische factoren zijn verantwoordelijk voor het verminderde geluk bij mensen met psychische stoornissen?

Het derde deel van dit proefschrift gaat dieper in op de grenzen van het utilitarisme. Op welke manier hangen wijsheid en geluk samen en bestaat er een grens aan streven naar meer plezier en minder pijn in het leven van individuen?

### Deel 1

#### Geluksadvies

Het eerste deel van dit proefschrift gaat over zelfhulp en geluk. Het bestaat uit twee delen. Eerst wordt stil gestaan bij de definitie van geluk die gebruikt wordt door

prominente adviseurs op het gebied van geluk en daarna wordt stil gestaan bij de kwaliteit van geluksadviezen die belangrijke intellectuelen door de eeuwen heen hebben verstrekt.

### *Wat bedoelen geluksadviseurs met geluk?*

Hoofdstuk 1 beschrijft het geluksadvies van prominente academici, dat beschikbaar is in boekwinkels, bibliotheken en op het internet. Het beargumenteert dat de kans dat lezers aan de hand van dit advies gelukkiger worden, verkleind wordt door het feit dat sommige auteurs werken vanuit onverwachte definities van het begrip geluk. Het zou beter zijn wanneer de zelfhulp auteurs uitgaan van een goede gedefinieerd geluksbegrip dat stoelt op positieve stemming. Dit is een grote gemene deler van de gebruikte definities en het is ook wat lezers verwachten op basis van een gewoon woordenboek. Zelfhulp auteurs krijgen ook het advies expliciet stil te staan bij het verschil tussen de vaardigheden die ten grondslag liggen aan een positieve mentale gezondheid en de uitkomst geluk. Het versterken van de competenties zal niet altijd resulteren in een toename van geluk en meer openheid over het onderscheid kan lezers helpen om het gegeven advies in perspectief te plaatsen.

### *Klassieke filosofen*

Hoofdstuk 2 bevat de introductie van een themanummer over geluksadvies van het ‘Journal of Happiness Studies’, waarvan ik heb gefungeerd als gastredacteur. In het themanummer staat het geluksadvies centraal van klassieke filosofen, aanhangers van de New Age filosofie en psychologische zelfhulpauteurs. De artikelen in het themanummer zijn opgebouwd aan de hand van drie vragen: 1) Wat wordt aangeraden om gelukkig te kunnen leven? 2) Op welke manier hangt het advies samen met het wereldbeeld van de auteur en hoe past het binnen de sociale, culturele en historische context van de auteur? 3) Kloppen de aanbevelingen met wat bekend is uit empirisch onderzoek naar geluk?

Gemeenschappelijke thema's zijn goed terug te vinden in het geluksadvies en voor elk modern advies van psychologen kan gemakkelijk een tegenhanger gevonden worden in onze intellectuele geschiedenis. De positieve psychologie heeft wat dit betreft dus niets nieuws te bieden en heeft alleen oude waarheden herontdekt en afgestoft. Het geluksadvies bevat echter ook veel tegenspraak, dat gedeeltelijk op het conto geschreven moet worden van het verschil in levensomstandigheden tussen de klassieke adviseurs en moderne lezers. Sommige gewaardeerde filosofen geven zelfs advies dat geluk zal verminderen, wanneer de lezers van tegenwoordig het ter harte zullen nemen. Het zou daarom goed zijn wanneer consumenten van geluksadvies op deze specifieke tekortkomingen gewezen worden. De aandacht die de positieve psychologie besteedt aan empirische grondslagen zal ons in staat stellen om een aantal contraproductieve ideeën aan de kant te schuiven, ook al hebben ze een prominente plaats verworven in onze ideeëngeschiedenis.

## *Moderne zelfhulpboeken*

Hoofdstuk 3, gaat in op de aanbevelingen voor een gelukkiger leven, dat gevonden kan worden in psychologische zelfhulpboeken, die zoveel verkocht worden in de moderne landen van vandaag de dag.

De eerste vraag voor de artikelen uit het themanummer was wat precies wordt aanbevolen en daarom heb ik de 57 best verkochte psychologische boeken uit Nederland inhoudelijk geanalyseerd. De boeken blijken niet primair gericht op het bestrijden van de symptomen van psychische stoornissen, maar op het uitbouwen van sterke kanten en het optimaliseren van het functioneren. De belangrijkste thema's zijn persoonlijke groei, persoonlijke relaties, omgaan met stress en identiteit. De boeken populariseren inzichten uit de psychologie en leunen zwaar op de zich ontwikkelende stroming van de positieve psychologie.

De tweede vraag uit het themanummer over de context van het advies wordt beantwoord met een verwijzing naar de moderne meerkeuze maatschappij, waar het aan individuen zelf wordt overgelaten om iets van hun leven te maken. Een belangrijk thema in zelfhulp boeken is dat je je goed kan voelen over jezelf en je leven, als je maar weet hoe je het aan moet pakken en de juiste keuzes maakt. Het benadrukken van persoonlijke sterke kanten heeft de zelfhulp gemeen met de positieve psychologie, maar daarnaast zijn de auteurs ook duidelijk beïnvloed door humanistische psychologie en haar nadruk op authenticiteit en zelfactualisatie.

De derde vraag betreft de kwaliteit van het advies. Opvallend is dat de zelfhulp auteurs zich richten op onderwerpen die een sterke correlatie vertonen met geluk. In principe zou je daarom kunnen verwachten dat de effecten van zelfhulp relevant kunnen zijn voor het welbevinden. Het is echter onmogelijk om meer dan een tentatieve conclusie te trekken, want de effecten van geluksadvies zijn niet of nauwelijks empirisch beproefd. Bovendien zijn er ook geronde redenen voor twijfel. Veel zelfhulpboeken bevatten adviezen die achterhaald zijn. Het is spijtig dat de positieve en negatieve effecten van zelfhulp geen aandacht krijgen in de academische psychologie, want de zelfhulp boeken zijn misschien wel het belangrijkste medium waardoor psychologische inzichten zich in de algemene bevolking verspreiden.

## *De tuin van Epicurus*

Hoofdstuk 4 handelt over Epicurus, de Griekse filosoof die leefde in de derde eeuw voor Christus. Hij hield zich net als veel van zijn tijdgenoten bezig met de vraag hoe een goed leven eruit zou moeten zien. In zijn visie was het verminderen van pijn en het vergoten van plezier het Grootste Goed. En hoewel Epicurus de naam heeft gekregen dat hij pleitte voor het najagen van verfijnde sensorische pleziertjes, blijkt hij in werkelijkheid veel aandacht te hebben besteed aan uitstel van behoeftebevrediging en het doorstaan van pijn. Hij raadde zijn volgelingen aan een bescheiden en contemplatief leven te leiden in vriendelijke gemeenschappen. Zijn advies kan gekenschetst worden als 'screen hedonisme'.

Epicurus (341–271 v. Chr.) leefde in een tijdsgewricht waarin veel aandacht bestond voor de filosofie – de Hellenistische periode in Griekenland. Het was een tijd waarin zich grote politieke en sociale veranderingen voltrokken, waarin verschillende culturen zich vermengden en de stadsstaten hun positie verloren. Epicurus hield zijn volgelingen voor dat geluk mogelijk zou zijn, wanneer zij zich terugtrokken uit de woelige buitenwereld en deel gingen uitmaken van een beschermende gemeenschap die ‘De Tuin’ werd genoemd. Zijn filosofie moet dan ook deels begrepen worden als een reactie op de politieke instabiliteit, de oorlogen en de gevechten om de macht uit zijn tijd en de daarbij horende gevoelens van vervreemding.

Hoofdstuk 4 bestudeert ook de bruikbaarheid van Epicurus’ advies voor lezers van vandaag. Geconcludeerd wordt dat Epicurus tamelijk nauwkeurig de factoren heeft beschreven die een positieve bijdrage leveren aan geluk. Zijn richtlijnen om het hoofd te bieden aan moeilijke omstandigheden en negatieve emoties zijn waardevol. Minder gelukkig is echter zijn idee dat geluk hetzelfde is als de afwezigheid van pijn en dat men zich eigenlijk uit het maatschappelijke leven zou moeten terugtrekken. Het deed hem veronderstellen dat geluk automatisch volgt als men de juiste instelling heeft en dat het niet nodig is actief de levensomstandigheden naar de eigen hand te zetten. En misschien was het voor de tijdgenoten van Epicurus de beste oplossing om zich terug te trekken, maar voor mensen in het huidige tijdsgewricht blijkt maatschappelijke betrokkenheid meer vruchten af te werpen.

### *Het duistere geluk van Schopenhauer*

De Duitse filosoof Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) staat bekend om zijn pessimisme en zijn geluksadvies wordt in hoofdstuk 5 kritisch beschouwd. Misschien is geluksadvies wel een verkeerd woord, want eigenlijk kwam hij niet verder dan het maken van een handleiding om het leven zo draaglijk mogelijk te houden. Deze praktische gids schreef hij aan het einde van zijn leven en is gebaseerd op zijn persoonlijke ervaringen en wordt geïllustreerd door citaten van denkers die zijn visie onderschrijven. Hij betoogt dat het leven goed is, wanneer iemands klachten triviaal worden en verveling zijn intrede doet. Omdat je eigenlijk weinig van het leven te verwachten hebt, is het wijs met zo min mogelijk tevreden te zijn en niet om meer te vragen.

Het lijkt waarschijnlijk dat het geluksadvies van Schopenhauer gestalte heeft gekregen dankzij zijn eigen positie in de samenleving. Schopenhauer maakte deel uit van de elite en werkte aan universiteiten, maar zijn ideeën kregen niet het warme onthaal waar Schopenhauer recht op meende te hebben. Zijn sociale leven en persoonlijke relaties schonken hem evenmin bevrediging en zijn geluksadvies lijkt een manier te zijn geweest waarop hij zichzelf ervan overtuigde dat hij niets miste wat van belang was. Hij gedroeg zich net als de vos in de fabel van Aesopus die de druiven niet te pakken kan krijgen en dan besluit dat het niet erg is, omdat ze toch zuur waren.

Het advies van Schopenhauer bevat maar weinig dat in overeenstemming is met de huidige kennis van geluk. Schopenhauers neurotische karakter maakte dat hij het

vermogen miste om bevredigende relaties aan te gaan, maar dat betekent nog niet dat zijn advies om vriendschappen en relaties te vermijden gerechtvaardigd is. Het verwerven van sociale vaardigheden en het actief onderhouden van vriendschappen biedt op den duur betere kansen op een gelukkig leven. Het letterlijk opvolgen van Schopenhauers advies zal ons waarschijnlijk minder gelukkig maken, zelfs wanneer we even neurotisch zijn als Schopenhauer was.

### *De beperkingen van dit themanummer*

Hoofdstuk 6 kijkt terug op het themanummer van het Journal of Happiness Studies. Alle opgenomen artikelen zochten naar de empirische gegevens die een indicatie konden geven voor de bruikbaarheid van bepaalde adviezen. Deze werkwijze heeft echter een aantal beperkingen. In de eerste plaats hebben we het huidige onderzoek naar geluk als meetlat gebruikt, terwijl de adviseur mogelijk een heel andere definitie van geluk voor ogen had. We hebben de oude werken doelbewust bekeken door moderne ogen, omdat we wilden weten wat moderne lezers met dergelijk advies zouden kunnen aanvangen. Een hierbij samenhangende beperking is dat we het advies niet hebben beoordeeld op grond van de bruikbaarheid voor tijdgenoten van de adviseur, maar voor moderne lezers.

Andere beperkingen zijn dat we ons hebben laten leiden door correlaties en niet voldoende onderzoek voorhanden hadden dat echte oorzakelijke verbanden onomstotelijk duidelijk maakte. Bovendien zijn persoonlijkheidsfactoren genegeerd.

Het themanummer kan dan ook niet beweren dat het tot definitieve oordelen is gekomen, maar we hebben getracht een eerste stap te zetten op weg naar beter empirisch gefundeerd geluksadvies. Voor de toekomst zou gekeken moeten worden naar een grotere verzameling van geluksadviseurs, naar de wisselwerking tussen individuele lezers en het geboden advies en zou experimenteel gekeken moeten worden naar de effectiviteit van het beschikbare advies.

## **Deel 2**

### **Geluk en psychische stoornissen**

Het tweede deel van dit proefschrift raakt aan een centrale discussie over maatschappelijke vooruitgang. Optimisten brengen naar voren dat we langer en gelukkiger leven dan ooit in de menselijke geschiedenis, maar de pessimisten wijzen op de psychische stoornissen die epidemische vormen hebben aangenomen in moderne maatschappijen. De vooraanstaande wetenschapper Richard Layard beschuldigt moderne samenlevingen bijvoorbeeld van rampzalig individualisme. Hij voegt hier redenerend vanuit het utilitarisme aan toe: ‘De geestelijke gezondheid is tegenwoordig ons grootste probleem – nog groter dan werkloosheid en armoede.

Klopt het dat het grote aantal mensen met psychische stoornissen onverenigbaar is met het streven naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal? In dit deel van dit proefschrift is geprobeerd enige vaste grond te vinden in deze discussie met behulp van

de data van het Nemesis onderzoek, dat bestaat uit een representatieve steekproef uit de volwassen Nederlandse bevolking (N = 7076). De deelnemers zijn geïnterviewd in 1996 en één en drie jaar later opnieuw. Psychische stoornissen werden gediagnosticeerd met behulp van een door de Wereldgezondheidsorganisatie ontwikkelde vragenlijst (Composite International Diagnostic Interview). Geluk werd gemeten met een enkele vraag waarbij de proefpersonen moesten aangeven hoe vaak zij zich gelukkig hadden gevoeld gedurende de afgelopen vier weken.

### *Gestoord geluk*

Hoofdstuk 7 zoekt een antwoord op drie vragen: 1) Hoe (on)gelukkig zijn mensen met psychische stoornissen? 2) Welke klinische kenmerken hangen samen met het geluk van mensen met psychische stoornissen? 3) Voorspelt een meer frequent geluksgevoel het herstel van psychische stoornissen?

Het blijkt dat 68.4% van de respondenten met een psychische stoornis aangeeft dat zij zich de afgelopen weken vaak gelukkig hebben gevoeld, terwijl ditzelfde geldt voor 89.1% van de mensen zonder een stoornis. De kansen op ongeluk zijn het grootst voor mensen met een stemmingsstoornis en met een verminderd sociaal en emotioneel rolfunctioneren. Geluk vergroot de kans op herstel van psychische stoornissen bij de volgende meting.

### *Weten ze waar ze het over hebben?*

Hoofdstuk 8 beantwoordt enkele vragen die worden opgeroepen door het feit dat zoveel mensen met psychische stoornissen zeggen dat ze gelukkig zijn. Dit is een verrassing. Layard schrijft in *The depression report; A New Deal for Depression and Anxiety Disorders* dat psychische stoornissen zeer ernstige gevolgen hebben voor het welbevinden: ‘We are not talking about the “worried well”. We are talking about people whose lives are crippled by their distress. Such mental pain is often worse than physical pain and it affects more people – not to mention their families.’

Als mensen met een psychische stoornis zeggen dat ze gelukkig zijn, kan men dan van dat antwoord op aan. Onderzoek laat zien dat dit meestal wel het geval is voor mensen die geen psychische stoornis hebben, maar dit gegeven kunnen we niet zomaar doortrekken naar de groep met psychische stoornissen. Mogelijk zijn mensen met psychische stoornissen minder goed in staat hun eigen geluk te beoordelen, omdat hun blik wordt vertroebeld door cognitieve en affectieve problemen.

We zijn er echter niet in geslaagd om deze veronderstelling hard te maken met onderzoeksgegevens. Integendeel, het lijkt erop dat hoewel het niveau van geluk lager is bij mensen met psychische stoornissen, dat toch dezelfde factoren een bijdrage leveren aan geluk als bij mensen zonder stoornis. Geluksmetingen bij mensen met psychische stoornissen zijn valide.

## *Verlies aan gelukkige levensjaren*

De eerste twee hoofdstukken van dit deel van het proefschrift hebben het grondwerk gedaan voor de hoofdstukken 9 tot en met 12, waarin ik heb geprobeerd de bevindingen in perspectief te plaatsen. Ik heb al gemeld dat ik het niet eens ben met Layard dat een psychische stoornis een synoniem is met de diepste ellende, maar Layard heeft wel gelijk dat ongeluk het meest voorkomt bij de minderheid van mensen die een psychische stoornis hebben. 85% Procent van de mensen die het minst vaak gelukkig zijn hebben een psychische stoornis. Dus wanneer je ideaal is om een bijdrage te leveren aan het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal in onze maatschappij, dan ligt het voor de hand te beginnen met het behandelen en het voorkomen van psychische stoornissen.

Om aandacht te vragen voor dit idee hebben we in hoofdstuk 9 berekend hoeveel gelukkige levensjaren in Nederland verloren gaan door psychische stoornissen. Deze maat is gebaseerd op het sprookjesideaal van een lang en gelukkig leven en wordt berekend door de levensverwachting met een wegingsfactor voor geluk te vermenigvuldigen. Hierbij wordt de gebruikte schaal voor geluk omgerekend naar een score tussen 0 en 1. De gemiddelde gelukkige levensverwachting van mensen in Nederland die geen psychische stoornis hebben is 63,2 jaar in Nederland. De psychische stoornissen zijn alleen al in Nederland verantwoordelijk voor het verlies van 36,6 miljoen gelukkige levensjaren.

## *Een positieve kijk op onze maatschappij*

De hoofdstukken 10 en 12 beargumenteren dat de het vele voorkomen van psychische stoornissen in moderne maatschappijen niet rechtstreeks vertaald kan worden in het idee dat de maatschappij niet deugt. Het leed van psychische stoornissen is een groot en reëel probleem, maar de meeste mensen met psychische stoornissen voelen zich vaak gelukkig. Het lijkt daarom redelijk te veronderstellen dat ook de mensen met psychische stoornissen profiteren van de gunstige levensomstandigheden die onze maatschappij biedt. Het feit dat meer mensen hulp zoeken vanwege psychische problemen, is niet noodzakelijk een uitvloeisel van een verrotte maatschappij. Het gemiddelde geluk is de laatste decennia ietsjes toegenomen en is de laatste jaren gelijk over de bevolking verdeeld, omdat diep ongeluk zeldzamer is geworden. Onze maatschappij is niet ideaal, maar kan er best mee door.

## *Een negatieve kijk op positieve psychologie*

Een laatste thema in dit deel van mijn proefschrift is de rol van de positieve psychologie en die komt aan de orde in de hoofdstukken 8, 10 en 11. Positieve psychologen hebben afstand genomen van het behandelen van psychische stoornissen en willen in plaats daarvan een bijdrage leveren waardoor mensen gaan floreren. Als dat lukt, is dat natuurlijk geweldig, en het is prachtig als het positieve psychologen lukt

om mensen een zetje in de rug te geven wanneer zij geen stoornis hebben maar zich toch weinig gelukkig voelen. In deze zin past de positieve psychologie in de utilitaristische ideologie.

Er kleven echter wel enkele gevaren aan het positief psychologische gedachtegoed. Het eerste gevaar is dat men afstand neemt van de mensen met psychische stoornissen, omdat zij behoren tot het studieterrein van de ‘oude negatieve psychologie’, terwijl het toch gaat om de groep waar in termen van geluk de meeste winst is te behalen. Een tweede reden om deze groep centraal te stellen in de positieve psychologie is dat de psychologische factoren die positieve psychologen proberen te beïnvloeden sterker met geluk correleren voor mensen met psychische stoornissen dan voor mensen zonder deze stoornissen. Ik denk dat dit betekent dat er bij mensen met psychische stoornissen niet alleen meer ruimte is voor verbetering, maar dat er ook een hoger rendement verwacht kan worden van de geboden interventies die een positieve psychische gezondheid moeten stimuleren.

Hierbij speelt ook mee dat de meeste mensen zonder psychische stoornissen al behoorlijk gelukkig zijn, en voor een groot deel van de bevolking lijkt het geluk niet verder te kunnen toenemen. Ik denk daarom dat de positieve psychologie er verstandig aan zou doen als zij aan zou geven dat sommige mensen geen hulp nodig hebben of misschien niet geholpen kunnen worden. Tevens zou de positieve psychologie meer oog moeten hebben voor de mogelijkheden om het leven van mensen te verbeteren met niet-psychologische interventies.

### **Deel 3**

#### **Over de waarde van geluk**

Het laatste deel van dit proefschrift gaat dieper in op de grenzen en valkuilen van het utilitarisme. Is het streven naar meer geluk altijd zaligmakend?

#### *Wijsheid en geluk*

Hoofdstuk 13 werpt nieuw licht op een klassiek vraagstuk. In de geschiedenis van het utilitarisme zijn er uitgebreide discussie gevoerd over de waarde van geluk, en over de spanning die zou bestaan tussen wijsheid en geluk. Sommige beschouwen wijsheid als het ‘superieure onderdeel van geluk’, terwijl anderen juist volhouden dat wijsheid veel mooier en nastrevenswaardiger is dan geluk. John Stuart Mill (1863) bracht bijvoorbeeld naar voren dat hij liever een ontevreden Socrates wilde zijn dan een gelukkig varken dat zich in de modder wentelt. Een accurate en wijze kijk op de realiteit zou de voorkeur verdienen boven meer positief affect.

Met behulp van de website *Hart en Ziel* van de Volkskrant werd bij 7037 respondenten een vragenlijst afgenomen over hun geluk en werd tevens de wijsheidstest afgenomen die door Monika Ardelt is ontwikkeld. We ontdekten daarbij dat wijsheid en geluk een bescheiden positieve samenhang vertonen. De overlap is echter gering en de verklaarde variantie is niet groter dan 9%. De reflectieve dimensie



van wijsheid lijkt het meest van belang. We vonden enige aanwijzingen dat wijsheid sterker samenhangt met geluk als mensen in moeilijke omstandigheden verkeren. Onze conclusie is dat de grootheden wijsheid en geluk niet op gespannen voet met elkaar staan, maar de overlap is zo bescheiden dat ze wel grotendeels onafhankelijk van elkaar zijn.

Onze onderzoeksresultaten kunnen gezien worden als een weerlegging van het filosofische idee dat wijsheid geluk in de weg zit. De zoektocht naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal hoeft niet verlaten te worden, omdat wijsheid belangrijker is dan geluk. Aan de andere kant is het ook duidelijk dat geluk niet alle levenssterreinen afdekt, en dat er ook buiten het utilitarisme nastrevenswaardige doelen zijn. Wijsheid is grotendeels onafhankelijk van geluk en is een waardevol doel voor menselijke ontwikkeling in zichzelf.

De laatste twee hoofdstukken stellen een andere grens aan het utilitarisme aan de orde. Is het mogelijk het geluk te vergroten door alle negatieve ervaringen te elimineren?

### *Transhumanisme*

In hoofdstuk 14 staat de technologische vooruitgang centraal die het misschien mogelijk zal maken het menselijke organisme opnieuw uit vinden. Deze mogelijkheid wordt onderzocht in een nieuwe vorm van biologisch utopisme die bekend staat als ‘transhumanisme’. Deze mensen voorzien dat het brein opnieuw ontworpen kan worden, zodat het aanleiding zal geven tot ‘meer gevarieerde ervaringen, levenslang geluk, en dagelijks opwindende piekervaringen’.

Ik probeer in te schatten hoe wenselijk dit toekomstbeeld is aan de hand van moderne emotietheorieën, en dan vooral met betrekking tot de veronderstelde functies van hedonistische ervaringen. Ik kom daarbij tot de conclusie dat de transhumanisten lijken te vergeten dat geluk zijn betekenis verliest als het gezien wordt als een geïsoleerd gevoel. Het affectieve systeem in ons brein is bedoeld om de lopende wisselwerking met de omgeving bij te sturen, en wanneer iemand altijd maar gelukkig is, zonder dat dit iets zegt over de manier waarop hij functioneert en in het leven staat, dan kan geluk gepaard gaan met oplopende ellende. Het geluk van transhumanisten lijkt dan op het nemen van sterke drugs die wel de pleziercentra in het brein stimuleren, maar zonder dat de kwaliteit van leven toeneemt. Het veranderen van het brein, zodat mensen zich gelukkig voelen, zonder dat zij meer grip krijgen op hun leven, werkt contraproductief.

### *Een positieve kijk op negatieve emoties*

Hoofdstuk 15 stelt dezelfde vraag aan de orde als het vorige hoofdstuk, maar nu in het kader van de positieve psychologie die het maximaliseren van positieve ervaringen als doel heeft. De stelling wordt betrokken dat de positieve psychologie geen goed zal

doen als ze zich verliest in wat de psycholoog Barbara Held de ‘tirannie van de positiviteit’ heeft genoemd, een houding die kenmerkend is voor de zelfhulp literatuur en voor enkele voormannen van de positieve psychologie.

Negatieve emoties vervullen een cruciale rol in ons leven en stellen ons in staat om aspecten van de realiteit onder ogen te zien die noodzakelijk zijn voor optimaal functioneren. Of, zoals Freud het uitdrukte, we hebben zowel het lust- als het realiteitsprincipe nodig. De ideologie die streeft naar het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal zou het idee moeten omarmen dat we negatieve emoties nodig hebben om toekomstige obstakels voor geluk te omzeilen. Negatieve emoties zijn cruciaal als we ons leven op het goede spoor willen houden.

# Dankwoord

Allereerst mijn dank aan de Erasmus Universiteit, die in het dankwoord een uithoekje heeft aangeboden waarin ik als promovendus mijn gang kan gaan. Ik mag zelfs mijn afgekeurde stellingen weergeven, bijvoorbeeld dat ik iedereen zou afraden te promoveren op een onderwerp dat hij of zij niet zonder stotteren kan uitspreken, zoals in mijn geval het utilitarisme. Als je gaat promoveren, moet je jezelf een keer in het openbaar verdedigen en je kan het jezelf ook te moeilijk maken. Ik troost me maar met de gedachte dat ik me niet in het Engels hoeft te verdedigen, want *utilitarianism* vind ik nog moeilijker.

Het maken van dit dankwoord is voor mij als een heilzame oefening uit de positieve psychologie, die een bijdrage levert aan het welbevinden. Een project dat ik me in eerste instantie vooral herinnerde als een reeks van lange uren alleen achter een bureau, blijkt op cruciale punten verder geholpen te zijn door tal van mensen, die zich volstrekt belangeloos hebben ingespannen om dit project tot een goed einde te brengen.

Als eerste wil ik graag Piet Vroon noemen, ook omdat ik zijn manier van werken en denken mis. Vroon was mijn scriptiebegeleider in 1989, toen ik een werkstuk maakte over geluk. Vroon spoorde aan antwoorden te vinden op grote levensvragen, in een psychologische wereld die losse feitjes produceert als een geëxplodeerde confettifabriek. Het woordje geluk, dat impliceert dat alle het goede en slechte in het leven als geheel wordt samengebald tot één enkel cijfer, kan gezien worden als een poging om een reeks van de snippers met elkaar te verbinden. Piet Vroon zette mij als eerste op dit spoor en Anton Ploeg en René van Hezewijk zorgden ervoor dat mijn overmoed binnen geaccepteerde academische kaders gebracht werd. Hun bemoediging resulteerde in een populair boek en dat boek mondde weer uit in dit proefschrift.

Hierbij heb ik veel geprofiteerd van mensen voor wie SPSS logisch in elkaar zit. Peggy Schyns was zo vriendelijk me bij de hand te nemen bij de eerste stappen. Martine Puts deed eigenlijk hetzelfde bij weer andere basisvaardigheden, maar ik zou dat liever beschrijven als het begin van enig statistisch raffinement. Hierna kon ik bijvoorbeeld een beroep doen op Quinten Raaijmakers en Wido Oerlemans. Quinten had aan een uurtje meedenken genoeg om mij op het spoor te zetten van een nieuwe publicatie. En Wido is in zulke gevallen vriendelijk genoeg om net te doen alsof zijn statistische kennis wat overdreven is, zodat mijn eigen tekortkomingen op dit gebied minder vreemd lijken. Mijn broer Rob bleek bereid een ingewikkeld databestand van de Volkskrant uit elkaar te pluizen, zodat ik een paper kon maken over wijsheid en geluk.

Veel dank ben ik ook verschuldigd aan mijn coauteurs. Ik noem Germaine Poot en Rozemarijn Schalkx graag als eerste. Zij hadden als student een mooie scriptie geschreven en Ruut Veenhoven had bedacht dat die best gepubliceerd konden worden in een special issue over geluksadvies van het *Journal of Happiness Studies*, waarvan ik als *guest editor* mocht fungeren. De kleine toezegging van Germaine en Rozemarijn

mondde uit in een jarenlang schrijfproces met tal van revisies, waarvan de uitkomst lang onzeker was. Het is uiteindelijk gelukt dit werk te publiceren, mede omdat zij zo lang hebben doorgezet. Voor de paper van Maarten Berg over New Age advies geldt hetzelfde.

Voor het tweede deel van dit proefschrift stelde Ron de Graaf de data van de Nemesis studie ter beschikking en maakte me hierbij wegwijs. Margreet ten Have voerde een aantal complexe statische analyses uit in Stata.

Monika Ardelt wil ik om twee redenen bedanken. Allereerst heeft zij een grote bijdrage geleverd aan wat ik zelf het mooiste hoofdstuk vind van dit proefschrift. Daarnaast heeft zij met haar paper over het verschil tussen wijsheid en kennis gezorgd voor een intensief geluismoment. Ze schrijft dat wijsheid vaak neerkomt op het voor jezelf ontdekken van oude waarheden. Als je die nog niet hebt doorleefd, blijven ze leeg. Een dwaas kan misschien wijze woorden op het juiste moment gebruiken, maar ze betekenen niets als de uitspraken niet weerspiegeld worden in de daden en de persoonlijkheid van de spreker. Ardelt heeft mij gesterkt in de ambitie om in dit proefschrift niet alleen enige nieuwe feitjes te presenteren, maar ook een sprankje wijsheid te vangen. Gelukkig hoef ik zelf niet te beoordelen of dit is gelukt.

Van de mensen van de website en het zaterdagkatern Hart en Ziel van de Volkskrant wil ik met name Peter de Greef bedanken. Door zijn enthousiasme slaagden we erin veel mensen naar de site te lokken en uiteindelijk hebben we dankzij die bezoekers boeiende wetenschappelijke data verzameld. Zonder Peter en zijn fijne collega's was het hoofdstuk over wijsheid er nooit gekomen. Oud collega Hedda Schut hielp bovendien bij het opruimen van de taalfouten in de inleiding. En momenteel onderzoek ik samen met Irit Rosen of de ideeën die ik voor dit proefschrift heb opgedaan enige toepassing kunnen vinden.

Veel mensen hebben bijgedragen aan dit werk door teksten door te lezen. Mijn Engelse teksten zijn stevast verbeterd door Miranda Aldham-Breary, ondanks dat ze van zichzelf zegt dat ze enige last heeft van dyslexie. Haar bemoedigende opmerkingen over de inhoud waren altijd zeer aan mij besteed. Verder wil ik met name mijn vader en Korina van Petersen bedanken. Zonder hen zou de tekst meer slordigheden bevatten. Mijn vader las zelfs het hele manuscript op het laatste moment van A tot Z door, wat ik eerlijk gezegd een hele opgave vind. Vera Modderkolk was belangrijk voor de opmaak van dit boekje. Zij maakte ook de website [www.grootstegeluk.nl](http://www.grootstegeluk.nl), waar veel van mijn artikelen over geluk zijn terug te vinden.

Van de mensen van de onderzoeksgroep geluk, wil ik met name Joop Mulder en Jan Ott noemen. Joop stond mij vaak bij het maken van pdf's en Jan straalt in mijn ogen altijd de rustige zekerheid uit dat het werken aan onderzoek naar geluk de moeite waard en misschien zelfs belangrijk is. Ik heb me daar vaak aan opgetrokken.

Het gevoel dat geluksonderzoek maatschappelijk belang zou kunnen hebben, is versterkt door Jacqueline Boerefijn, Linda Bolier, Onno Hamburger en Hein Zeegers. Wij hebben samen met enkele anderen een conferentie over de mogelijkheden van de positieve psychologie georganiseerd. In de slipstream van Jan Walburg, voorzitter van

de Raad van Bestuur van het Trimbos-instituut, proberen we geluk meer op de kaart te zetten. De samenwerking met hen leverde spannende discussies op en gaf energie.

Een woord van dank gaat ook uit naar Mia Leijssen, die mij op de website existentieel welzijn de gelegenheid geeft ideeën te spuien over geluk, waarop psychotherapeuten en coaches reageren. De doordachte reactie van de cursisten bieden enige bescherming tegen het gevoel dat je een proefschrift maakt om vervolgens je geld weer te gaan verdienen met iets waar je geen verstand van hebt. Jacqueline Boerefijn deed iets soortgelijks met haar idee voor het ontwikkelen van Lessen in Geluk, waar ik een bijdrage aan mocht leveren. Kinderen die zes van deze lessen volgen gaan zich niet prettiger voelen, maar halen wel hogere cijfers, wat toch ook mooi is. Of zoals de cartoonist Ashleigh Briljant al aanraadde: ‘To be sure of hitting the target, shoot first, and call whatever you hit the target.’

Graag dank ik ook mijn promotor Ruut Veenhoven. Zijn rol bij de totstandkoming van dit proefschrift is groot geweest. Hij heeft onderwerpen verzonnen, contacten gelegd, data geregeld en een omgeving geschapen waarbinnen het promoveren mogelijk werd. Hij is zelfs zo enthousiast, dat wat ik deed nooit genoeg was en nog heel vaak anders moest. Mijn proefschrift is mede daardoor wat uit de hand gelopen, maar ook mooier en completer geworden.

Prettig was ook dat er vrienden waren, zoals Saskia Wijsbroek en Maaïke Pouwels, die bereid waren mijn verhalen over het promoveren aan te horen en te relativiseren. Soms heb je mensen nodig die je uitleggen dat wereld nu eenmaal niet zo in elkaar zit als eigenlijk zou moeten.

Mijn familie bedank ik tot slot doordat ze maar bleven vragen wanneer mijn proefschrift af zou komen. Ik gaf dan stevast een datum door die daarna toch weer onhaalbaar bleek, zonder dat dit bij hen leidde tot cynisme. Ik heb dit werkstuk afgemaakt om de ‘wanneervraag’ definitief achter me te kunnen laten.

# Curriculum Vitae

Ad Bergsma is opgeleid als psycholoog aan de Universiteit Utrecht en werd bij het maken van zijn afrondende scriptie begeleid door René van Hezewijk en Anton Ploeg. Toen de scriptie klaar was, adviseerde de eerst genoemde om de scriptie uit te bouwen tot een proefschrift. In 1990 was het niet mogelijk een plekje te verwerven als AIO op het gebied van geluk.

Ik heb mijn scriptie toen uitgebouwd tot het boek *Emoties en kwaliteit van bestaan*. Op dat moment dacht ik met dit onderwerp klaar te zijn, maar Ruut Veenhoven recenseerde het boek en vroeg mij zonder vergoeding een proefschrift bij hem te maken.

Mijn geld heb ik in die jaren verdiend als wetenschapsjournalist. Ik heb onder andere gewerkt voor Psychologie Magazine, De Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, het AD en Psy. In al die jaren heb ik veel geschreven over geluk voor een algemeen publiek. Voor de Volkskrant heb ik bijvoorbeeld de gelukslessen van Michael Fordyce bewerkt en vertaald onder de noemer 'levenskunstjes'.

## Opleiding:

1977-1983 Atheneum B te Papendrecht.

1983-1984 Propedeuse Landbouw Hogeschool Wageningen.

1984-1985 Leerling-verpleegkundige in het Bergweg Ziekenhuis te Rotterdam.

1985-1990 Psychologie en Culturele Antropologie aan de Universiteit Utrecht.

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